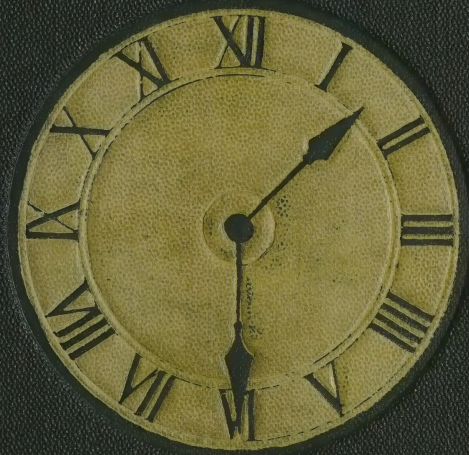


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ISABEL
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At One-Thirty



“Cain !”

At One-Thirty

A MYSTERY

BY

ISABEL OSTRANDER

Illustrations by

W. W. FAWCETT



NEW YORK

W. J. WATT & COMPANY

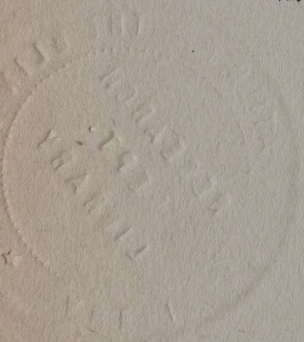
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At One-Thirty

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AT ONE-THIRTY

CHAPTER I

THE PASSING OF GARRET APPLETON

RISING from his chair, Damon Gaunt crossed the library to the window, and flung it wide, drinking in the sultry air of early autumn as though he loved it, listening to the familiar noises of the street with ears eagerly attuned. Although, in passing, he had touched the different articles of furniture in his path casually and lightly, with those long, slim, wonderfully sensitive fingers of his, it had been but absent-mindedly, not gropingly hesitant, and it was not until one looked straight and level into his soft, deep-brown eyes that one realized they were sightless.

He sighed deeply as he stood at the window, his fingertips touching delicately here and there the trailing tendrils of ivy that reached out boldly from the trellised vine, which clambered over the brick walls of the house. No man loved life—vibrant, pulsating life—more than Damon Gaunt, nor more deeply yearned to know it to the full.

But he had never permitted himself to regret the sight, which from birth had been denied to him, save in his life-work, the detection of crime.

The man's condition and his career would seem in themselves to be paradoxical. How a being deprived of one of the senses—by the majority considered the most essential—could engage, and successfully, in a profession that required every attribute, every resource, known to mankind, developed to the *n*th degree, seemed inexplicable. Yet Damon Gaunt had never lost a case.

He turned suddenly from the window, and stood expectant, although no sound audible to the normal ear had broken the stillness within the house. In a moment, however, a softly treading footfall might have been heard on the carpeted hall; there was a moment's hesitation, and then a quick tap at the door, accompanied by an involuntary deferential cough.

Damon Gaunt smiled slightly to himself. He had never been able to break Jenkins of that unnecessary note of warning.

"Come in!" he said.

Jenkins entered, with a small salver in his hand.

"Card, sir. Gentleman to see you."

Gaunt approached, and took the card from the salver. The corners of his mobile, smooth-shaven mouth twitched again. He had at least succeeded in breaking Jenkins of the habit of shoving things into his hand.

His fingertips traveled over the heavily engraved card; but the lettering upon it was too elaborate for his sense of touch to spell for him. He turned to a large writing-desk in a corner.

"Miss Barnes, the name, please."

A tall, angular, precise young woman came forward, and took the card from his hand.

"Mr. Yates Appleton."

"Yates Appleton?" What was it that the name seemed vaguely to convey? Oh, yes! Something his secretary, Miss Barnes, had read to him in the morning papers, lately. The man had tried unsuccessfully to break a will, or something of the sort. He must be looked up later, perhaps.

"Show him up, please, Jenkins."

"Yes, sir."

Without a word, Miss Barnes gathered up her papers, and passed into an inner room, and Gaunt seated himself in a deep leather chair, and waited. Presently, returning footfalls could be heard—Jenkin's regular, cat-like tread, and shorter, nervous, uneven steps accompanying him. Both paused at the door.

"Come in, Mr. Appleton. That will do, Jenkins. I'll ring if we need you."

Mr. Appleton crossed the threshold, dropped the cane he was carrying with a clatter upon the floor, retrieved it, and stood before Gaunt's chair. He was a man of perhaps the early thirties, slightly thick of neck and girth, slightly bald, with a round,

puffy pink face, and round, staring blue eyes. Just now, the face was mask-like with horror, and the eyes were telescoped, like those of a defunct crab; but of these indications Gaunt was, of course, in ignorance.

"Sit down, Mr. Appleton," he said, composedly, "and tell me what I can do for you."

Mr. Appleton laid his hat and stick upon the writing-table, sniffing nervously as he did so, and seated himself.

"Mr. Gaunt, I've come on a terrible affair. My brother, Garret Appleton, was found dead this morning, in his den, with a bullet in his heart! He'd been murdered in the night!"

The young man shuddered, and licked his dry lips, his nostrils twitching.

"Murdered! Did anyone hear the shot fired?"

"No. That's the strangest part of it, although it's a huge house, and the servants all sleep away up-stairs, above the rooms of the family and guests, and the den is on the ground floor, at the back. It's an awful thing Mr. Gaunt, awful! It's just about going to kill my mother—the notoriety, and all!"

"Notoriety! And—grief?"

"Oh, yes, grief, of course. That was what I meant." He sniffed again, as he spoke, and rubbed his blunt, snout-like nose with his gloved finger.

"Was the weapon found?"

"No, certainly not! How would it be? It was

murder, I tell you—murder! The man—whoever it was—carried the revolver away with him, of course. The motive was robbery, that was plain—the window was open and my brother's watch, purse, and jewelry gone." Mr. Appleton sniffed. "My mother wanted me to come at once for you, before the police get trying to rake up family scandal. My car is outside—"

"I understand. Very well, then, Mr. Appleton, we will go at once." Gaunt rose, and pressed a button in the wall. "But just a word, first, before we start. I say this for your own good. You will need all your wits about you, and all your nerve, if I'm not mistaken. Take some disinterested advice, and go a little light on that cocaine for the next few days."

Young Mr. Appleton gave a violent start, and drew in his breath sharply.

"I don't know what you mean!" he blustered.

"Your constant sniffing and rubbing your nose gave you away," Gaunt explained, quietly.

Mr. Appleton crumpled.

"Oh, well, it isn't a habit with me, anyway. I started in my college days, just for a lark. I can give it up whenever I want to, without the slightest trouble in the world!"

"Then I should advise you to do so speedily. Jenkins, my hat and coat."

Speeding up-town in the fast motor, Gaunt turned to his new client.

"Mr. Appleton, in undertaking your case, you must know that I demand the absolute confidence of those by whom I am employed. There must be no retaining of facts, no half-measures. The questions I ask must be answered, whether they seem relevant or not, fully and truthfully, with no reservations. Is that understood?"

"Why, y-yes, of course, Mr. Gaunt; that goes without saying. We want you to find out the t-truth!"

"How many are there in the family—the immediate family?"

"The household, you mean? My mother, my brother and his wife, his wife's sister, and myself. But my mother and I are staying there only temporarily, while our own house is being done over."

"That is all except the servants? No guests?"

"None staying in the house. There were some people there last evening, old family friends. The police are at the house, now," he added with nervous irrelevance. "Infernal nuisance, this whole terrible affair! My mother relies upon you to prevent as much of the fuss and bother as you can."

"The fuss and bother, as you term it, are, I am forced to tell you, indispensable in a case of sudden and violent death, from whatever cause—doubly so when crime is in question. They are very necessary to the cause of justice. Mr. Appleton, you speak of the possibility of the police raking

up family scandal. What scandal is there for them to discover?"

"None, really." Mr. Appleton sniffed hastily. "The only thing is, one doesn't care to have family jars and unpleasantness brought to light. My mother and I dislike—that is, we don't get on at all with Garret's wife and her sister, and there have been dissensions lately—rows, if you like that better—which the police might try to make mountains out of. That's all. Every family has that sort of thing—rows. But the police are so stupid they might try to look beyond the very obvious cause."

"I understand, perfectly. By whom was the body discovered, and when?"

"At about half-past six this morning." Mr. Appleton replied to the last part of the question first. "Katie, the housemaid, came down to straighten the room, and found my brother lying dead on the floor, and her screams aroused the whole house."

"You awakened with the rest, and rushed down?"

"No-o. The fact is, Mr. Gaunt, I'm not a light sleeper at any time, and I'd been out pretty late last night. It was some time after Katie found my brother's body before the commotion wakened me, and quite awhile before I roused from my sleepy stupor enough to realize that something unusual was going on. When I did get downstairs, I found all the household collected in the

den, and most of the servants crowded in the doorway. Mother had sent for the doctor; but anyone could have seen it would be of no use. Natalie, my brother's wife, was in a state of collapse, and Barbara, her sister, was attending her. Garret was leaning back in his chair, with his face all distorted and gray, and his eyes staring, and there was a great splashing blood-stain on his shirt-front. But I'll never forget the look on his face. It was the most horrible I have ever seen. . . . Here we are now, Mr. Gaunt," he added, as the car slowed down, and then stopped, with a jerk. "This way."

He led the detective swiftly through the lines of police, sternly holding back the curious rabble of morbid sight-seers, up the great stone steps, and the massive vestibule doors closed behind them. There was a subdued, soundless stir, a tenseness in the air of the silent house, which led unmistakably in one direction, and was more acutely manifest to the detective than to the drug-dulled perceptions of his companion.

At the door of the den, they paused, and young Mr. Appleton hung back, his breath coming in great gasps, his hand clutching Gaunt's arm in a sudden, involuntary grip of nervous terror and dread, only to be as quickly withdrawn.

"Mr. Gaunt! How does it happen that you are here? I'm glad you've come."

A man's step sounded, and a large, powerful hand gripped the detective's in a hearty grasp.

“Coroner Hildebrand!” Gaunt’s exclamation of pleasure at a well known voice, with a certain admixture of relief at the scarcely expected presence of a friend and former ally on more than one difficult case, was interrupted by a woman’s voice—the coldest, most implacably hardened, that he had ever heard.

“I sent for Mr. Gaunt, Coroner,” the voice said. “I wish him to represent my interests and those of my family in this most shocking, most terrible affair.” There was the rustle of a silk garment, and the voice sounded again, this time close to Gaunt’s side. “I am Mrs. Appleton, Mrs. Finlay Appleton, the mother—” The voice broke oddly, and there was a strained silence. It was not the break of emotion, of uncontrollable maternal emotion face to face with tragedy. There was more an element of craft in it, as if a sudden thought, an excess of caution, had sealed her lips. Yet her sentence seemed to have been, on the face of it, simple enough: she had started to say that she was the mother of the dead man. Why had she checked herself?

“I am glad to have come, if I can be of any assistance, Mrs. Appleton.” Gaunt said, after waiting vainly an appreciable moment for her to continue. “I shall want to have a little talk with you later, as well as with the other members of your family and the servants; but just now my business lies with Coroner Hildebrand. Coroner, you’ve

stretched a point before this for me. May I examine the body, if I disarrange nothing?"

"Why, yes, I think so, Mr. Gaunt. The body is still here in the chair. Nothing has been disturbed except by the physician's cursory examination—nothing more was necessary. The man's been dead for hours, shot through the heart."

"Oh, I knew the body was still here." Gaunt smiled. "There is a certain slight, but unmistakable, odor about death, even when so short a time has elapsed after it has taken place, which is plainly evident to a nose trained for it."

"To your nose, you mean," returned the Coroner, as the two men moved toward the grim chair with its silent occupant.

Now a new sound broke upon the significant stillness. It was a woman's heart-rending sob, long drawn out, as if pent up beyond the limit of human endurance, and rising in the crescendo of ungovernable hysteria.

"Oh-h-!" the moan ended in a shriek of despair. "This is horrible—I cannot bear it another moment! I shall go mad—mad!"

"Natalie!" the calm, cutting voice of the elder Mrs. Appleton fell like a dash of icy water on the agonized wail. "If you have no respect for the living, at least try to show some for the dead. This is no fitting time and place to indulge your undisciplined, selfish emotions."

"Oh, hush, dearest—please, please hush!" It

was a third woman's voice, low, slightly husky, vibrant with the deepest tenderness and a controlled passion. If the voice of the elder Mrs. Appleton had impressed Gaunt as being the most rigidly unfeeling he had ever heard, that of the last speaker was the most eloquent of the music of the soul. He had never in all his career heard a human voice with so subtle and poignant an appeal. Here was a woman who would be true and loyal to the core, and who had a capacity for loving, if her low, throbbing tones did not belie her, to the uttermost abnegation of self. He had no difficulty in his own mind in placing the two voices. The one, raised high and shrill in an abandonment of hysterical despair, had yet in its cadence the drawling sweetness of the lower, more vibrant tones. They were the sisters, the two with whom the elder Mrs. Appleton and her living son did not "get on"; the one trembling in hysteria was the widow of the murdered man, and the other was the sister-in-law, whom Yates Appleton had called Barbara.

There was a sudden whirl, a soft rustle, and something hurled itself violently between Gaunt and the Coroner, laying a small icy hand on each, imploringly.

"Oh, you will let me go to my room?" the hysterical voice sobbed, plaintively. "I can't stand any more—indeed, indeed, I cannot! How can I be expected to endure it here another moment, with his eyes staring at me so horribly?"

"It will be best for her to go, if you please," put in the low, vibrant tones. "There are reasons why my sister's strength must not be over-taxed any more than necessary, just now. I will answer for her presence when you wish to question her."

"And I desire my daughter-in-law to remain. Her proper place is beside the body of her husband. You are beginning early, Miss Ellerslie, to issue orders in my son's house!" The voice of the elder Mrs. Appleton did not tremble, but it vibrated harshly with her unconcealable animosity, like jangling wires.

"This is my sister's house now, Mrs. Appleton." The low, soft tones, with the little drawl, were courteous; but there was now an undertone of the passion of which Gaunt had felt the possibility, although it was under admirable control. "My sister has been tortured enough. Have we your permission to retire, Coroner Hildebrand?"

"Yes, Miss Ellerslie, I wish you would all do so, please—you, Mrs. Appleton and Mr. Appleton, also. I wish to make a thorough examination of this room, with Mr. Gaunt and the Inspector. We will interview you later."

Mrs. Finlay Appleton opened her lips to protest; but, realizing that she was endangering her dignity by a further exhibition of ill-nature, she led the way haughtily from the room, her son following with evident relief in her wake, and the group of

open-mouthed servants clustered at the door disappearing like chaff in her path.

The four men were alone; the quiet, spare figure of Gaunt, the Coroner, and a burly Inspector, and stolid-looking officer, who had stood silently at one side during the preceding scene.

"Who is it—Inspector Hanrahan?" asked Gaunt, with a swift smile.

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. How are you, sir?"

"I thought I recognized the brand of your tobacco—and isn't Officer Dooley here? I know that asthmatic breathing of his."

Officer Dooley grinned and shifted from one foot to another like a bashful boy.

"If you don't train down, Dooley, you will be too fat for the force, before you know it. Now for business, Coroner. Any possible idea at what time Mr. Garret Appleton met his death?"

"No, Mr. Gaunt. I should say, in the neighborhood of one o'clock, but of course we can't be absolutely certain."

Gaunt had approached the body, and was passing his fingers lightly and thoroughly over it.

"No doubt about robbery being the motive?" he asked, as he worked.

"Oh, no," the Inspector put in, easily. "No weapon found, window open, tracks before window in the carpet and on the curtains, and Mr. Appleton's jewelry and money gone."

"I understand." Gaunt bent and sniffed the

powder-blackened shirt about the wound. "Looks as if Mr. Appleton might have recognized, or thought he recognized, the thief, doesn't it, when he let him get as near as he did to shoot him, without attempting to get on his feet, or make any outcry?"

"Maybe he did jump to his feet, and fell back again when he was shot?" suggested the Inspector, thoughtfully.

"Hardly, seeing the way he was clutching the arms of the chair. Even death didn't release that vise-like grip. He might have clutched his breast when the shot tore its way through him, if he had had time. No, it looks as if he's been sitting there a long time, grasping the arms of his chair, and the end found him without the movement of a muscle. Then there's another thing."

Gaunt was talking very fast now, but his fingers were working faster, darting with lightning-like rapidity over the dead man's clothing.

"Whoever robbed him, made a pretty thorough job of it. They evidently weren't afraid of being disturbed at their work, and that seems strange, when a revolver presumably lay smoking on the table and the reverberations of its explosion must still be echoing through the sleeping house. They didn't tear out the vest- or cuff-buttons, or the shirt-studs, but removed them carefully, although with bungling fingers, as you can feel, here, and

here. And—wait! That's a curious thing about the inside of the vest-pocket."

"What is?" asked Coroner Hildebrand.

"Never mind, I'll look into that later. Got a list of the missing jewelry, money, watch, and all that?"

"Inspector Hanrahan has, of course. He—"

"Well, I don't want it now. This the window which was found open after the bird had flown?"

Gaunt felt his way over to the window, felt the sill and the fastenings, and the velvet [and] lace hangings, and the rich pile of the carpet at his feet. When he encountered there some sticky, congealed wet places, he knealt and smelt them, kneading his hands in the damp velvet.

When he rose and turned, his usually impassive face was alive with interest—a very different interest from that which had glowed upon it when he stood in his library window in the early morning. Now, it was keener, more poignant, and there was nothing in it of pleasurable sensation—rather, a sharp mental interest. He came slowly back to that figure in the chair, wiping his hands carefully on his handkerchief as he did so, while the other men watched him in a sort of fascination, as silent as it was intent.

Then he took the cold head in his hands, feeling its shape with the trained, sure delicacy of a surgeon, a phrenologist. His deft fingers passed downward more softly, more gently over the dead

features, tracing each strained muscle each curve and angle, seeing, with his ten marvelous eyes of the fifth sense, the expression on the face of the murdered man.

At length, he turned to where the others stood.

"Well?" the Inspector's voice grated with suspense in the silence. "Found out anything, Mr. Gaunt?"

"A little, though I haven't begun to examine the room thoroughly yet. There are a lot of queer features about this case, which you mayn't have found time to go into. In the first place, those tracks over there at the window were not made by muddy feet, but bloody hands."

"Of course," the Coroner returned, impatiently, "we know that. Those traces were left by the murderer, going out."

"How about coming in? He didn't leave any traces then, although it rained hard last night, and there's soft loam and top soil in the garden beneath this window. I can smell the late autumn flowers. Again, the window was opened from the inside, not out, and the person who opened it was afraid, not of taking his time about it, but of making a noise; for he opened the catch of the window in the proper way, and then painstakingly bent and twisted it with some blunt instrument to give it the appearance of having been forced, though, had he dared make any noise, he could have shattered it with a single blow. And moreover, gentlemen,

that blood about the window was not fresh blood, wiped from the murderer's red hands in making good his escape. It was stale, congealed blood when it was applied to the carpet and curtains. When the window was forced and the semblance of robbery and escape given to the scene of murder in this room, Garret Appleton had already been dead for some hours."

CHAPTER II

THE INSTRUMENT OF DEATH

THE men looked at one another.

“How do you know that—about the blood, I mean?” demanded the Inspector, bluntly. “How can you tell?”

“Feel it, man, feel it!” returned Gaunt. “It’s dried in thick, raised, sticky clots. And, unless I’m mistaken, it wasn’t brushed there by the hand of the murderer, but was deliberately wiped there, placed there hours after the murder.”

The Coroner strode to the window.

“Mr. Gaunt is right,” he cried. “Come here, Inspector! It looks like a deliberate and very clumsy attempt to brand the crime as an outside job. It must have been for robbery, of course; one of the servants, probably. But why the fellow should have waited for hours before preparing his alibi, running the risk of some one discovering the crime in the meantime, is beyond me. Also, what has become of the jewels and the weapon—but they’ll come to light, of course.”

“I’ll have the house searched at once, and the servants questioned; put through the third degree, if necessary!” Inspector Hanrahan replied, excitedly.

Gaunt had been stooping, feeling about on the floor before the chair in which the dead man sat, and, at the Inspector's words, he rose, his long fingers slipping for an instant into his waistcoat-pocket. He had discovered upon the floor before the chair three tiny hard globules, like irregular pearls.

"I wouldn't do that, Inspector," he suggested, mildly. "At least, searching the house won't do any harm; but don't question the servants in such a manner that you'll lead any of them to suspect that you don't think this was an outside job. If you do, you may defeat your own ends." He turned to the Coroner. "You'll have an autopsy performed immediately, I suppose? I'd like to know at once, if you'll tell me, what caliber and make cartridge was used."

"I'll let you know gladly. You'll be here all day?"

"Yes. I want to make a more thorough examination of the room now, and then I should like to speak to some members of the family. That robbery theory still looks good, of course, Coroner Hildebrand, if it weren't for one thing."

"What's that?" the Inspector turned sharply from the window.

"The dead man's face. Look at his expression. Blank horror and craven fear are stamped upon it!"

"Look here, Mr. Gaunt, I don't see what you can

tell about his expression!" Inspector Hanrahan's voice held a good-natured, easy contempt.

"By feeling the drawn, contracted muscles," Gaunt said, tersely. He resented bitterly any reference to the handicap nature had placed upon him, yet he realized the justice of the implication.

"It may be only the death-agony, the shock, you know, which has distorted his face," the Coroner broke in hastily, soothingly.

"Look at him yourself, Coroner Hildebrand. Does he look like a man suddenly attacked without warning, or like one who recognized his assailant, and read his approaching fate in the other's eyes, but felt powerless to avert it?"

The Coroner was silent, and, with a slight shrug, Gaunt turned away, and bent over the writing-table, his hands playing lightly among the papers and ornaments it contained. From there, he made a circuit of the room, passing swiftly from one article of furniture to another, more as if to orient himself than with any idea of a thorough examination.

Suddenly he paused before a low, swinging lamp of ancient brass, and felt carefully of its jangling pendant ornaments. From one of these, a tiny strand of hair hung, as if caught from the unwary head of some feminine Absalom, in passing beneath it. It was a long strand of but two or three fine, silky hairs, and the detective wound

them carefully around his finger, then placed them in the vest-pocket with the tiny white globules.

Meanwhile, the other men went about their gruesome task of removing the body to an adjoining room for the autopsy, and Gaunt heard their heavy, subdued tread down the hall. With silent haste, he approached the door and closed it softly, then returned to the library-table in the center of the room, beside which the body of the murdered man had been seated, and opened drawer after drawer, his hands searching feverishly among the papers they contained, as if seeking some object he fully anticipated finding. If Garret Appleton really had known his assailant, and might actually have feared for his life, it was logical to suppose that he might have kept some weapon with which to protect and, if necessary, defend himself. If that weapon should happen to be a revolver, of the same caliber as that with which he had been shot—

The detective's fingers closed over a cold steel object in the lowest drawer, and with an exultant exclamation he drew it forth. It was a revolver. He placed it hastily to his nose, and sniffed it, then, with a satisfied air, he thrust it into his hip-pocket, and, when the Inspector reappeared, he was fingering and smelling the hangings and pillows of the large, richly-upholstered divan, about which a peculiar heavy perfume seemed to cling.

"Well, I've finished here," he announced. "I'd like to see my client now."

"Found anything more?" the Inspector asked, with a grin.

"No, nothing. Guess your robbery theory goes. Interviewed any of the servants yet?"

"Yes; and, between you and me, Mr. Gaunt, I think I'm on the right trail. From all accounts, Mr. Garret Appleton wasn't a very pleasant customer. Dissipated, he was, and overbearing, and a bully. He led his wife and everyone else pretty much of a dog's life, and about a month ago he drove his valet, Louis, out of the house, and the man was heard to vow that he'd get even. This Louis was a Frenchman, a hot-headed man himself, and he was very friendly with one of the maids. She might have let him in last night, and he, only meaning to rob the master, might have murdered him without premeditation. Of course, this morning, seeing what he'd done, the maid would be afraid to admit he was here. Anyway, that's my theory. Where are you going?"

"To interview Mrs. Appleton."

Gaunt found the object of his search ensconced in her morning-room, and, if the reaction of her hour of silence and composure after the shock of the discovery of her son's body, and the ensuing scene in the den, had unnerved her, had brought with it any flood of tenderness and natural grief,

there was no evidence of it in her voice or manner, or the steadiness of her hand.

"You have discovered anything, Mr. Gaunt—any clue to the thief who killed my son?"

"Only that he was a most uncommon thief, Mrs. Appleton—that the manner of your son's death presents some very unusual features. As I have already informed Mr. Yates Appleton, in undertaking your investigation for you, I must make one condition—"

"Your fee—" the elderly lady interrupted him, coldly.

"My fee has nothing whatever to do with it. That can be arranged later. My condition is that of absolute confidence. My questions must be freely and fully answered, with no quibbling, no half-truths. If I ask you to go into family history, your common sense will tell you that it is through no idle curiosity, but a necessary measure, if I am to help you. I need not tell you that any communications will be strictly confidential."

"I am quite prepared to answer any questions you may ask, Mr. Gaunt; although I cannot see what bearing family history, as you call it, may have upon a case of robbery and murder so obviously perpetrated by a common thief." Mrs. Appleton's voice was steady and frigid; but there was an underlying note of uneasiness not lost upon the quick ears of the detective.

"You must allow me to be the best judge of that,"

he returned quietly. "Mrs. Appleton, how long has your son been married?"

"Three years."

"And his wife, before her marriage, was—"

"A Miss Ellerslie—Miss Natalie Ellerslie."

"Of New York?"

"No, of the South; from Louisville, Kentucky."

"And, since his marriage, he and his wife have lived here?"

"Yes, in this house. My husband built and gave it to them for a wedding-gift."

"Mrs. Appleton, in your opinion, was your son's married life happy?"

"Quite the reverse. Understand, I am not defending my son. He has not been a model husband by any means; but the blame for that lies with his wife alone. You know, you must have heard, what these spoiled penniless Southern beauties are. Had my son married a woman of the world, a woman of his own set, I may say his own station, she would have known how to make him happy, to hold his interest. But I fail to see what all this has to do with his murder."

"She is beautiful, then, young Mrs. Appleton?" Gaunt asked quietly, ignoring her last remark.

"She is considered so." The older woman's tone was bitter. "A certain blond, doll-like type of prettiness."

"And you disapproved of this marriage?"

"Most heartily, I recognized its unsuitability from the first. And you see how it has ended!"

"But, surely, my dear Mrs. Appleton, you do not consider the fact of your son's marriage to be in any way connected with his death?"

There was a pause, and the detective could hear her rapid breathing, her effort to regain her iron control of herself. At length she spoke:

"I do not, Mr. Gaunt. I have been unable, since you started this line of inquiry, to connect it with the matter in hand."

"I am simply trying in my own mind to comprehend the relations the members of your son's household bear to one another. He and his wife were unhappy. Was that due in part, do you think, to the presence of your daughter-in-law's sister?"

"In great part. I see that you fully understood the significance of the scene in the den, beside my son's body this morning. Barbara Ellerslie is an interloper. She made her home here in my son's house, at her sister's invitation, and she has been the cause of many unpleasant, disgraceful domestic scenes, humoring Natalie, aiding and abetting her in her senseless quarrels and accusations against Garret, and constantly stirring up strife between them. My son could not oust her; for Natalie would not give her up. Naturally, Barbara made herself indispensable to her sister, in order to enjoy the advantages, social and other-

wise, of living here, instead of in the dull, shabby-genteel surroundings of her Southern home."

"Miss Ellerslie spoke just a little while ago of there being a reason why young Mrs. Appleton's strength should not be overtaxed just now. Am I to infer that—"

"Natalie will in a few months become a mother."

A silence followed the terse statement, a silence in which the concentrated bitterness, and thwarted impotent hatred, expressed unconsciously in the tone of the few words, sank deep into the detective's mind. It told him volumes, which before he had only suspected, and cleared the way before him.

"Mrs. Appleton, your younger son's name has been in the papers lately, in connection with some effort to break a will. I can, of course, learn all about it in detail by having my secretary look over my newspaper files, but I prefer to hear about it from you. Will you give me the particulars?"

There was a stiff, silken rustle, as the lady moved restlessly, uneasily, in her chair, and then a new sound smote upon the detective's ears; a sharp, staccato tattoo. Mrs. Appleton was nervously tapping the broad mahogany arms of her chair, with the rounded tips of her finger nails. At last, she spoke quickly, imperiously; but the pause after his question had been so lengthy as to rob her words of their desired significance, and betray her real state of mind—her reluctance to discuss the new topic he had introduced.

"Mr. Gaunt, my son's murderer may be making good his escape, may be getting forever beyond our reach, while you are wasting time by delving into wholly extraneous matters. The matter of my late husband's will can have no possible connection with my son's murder." The cold, forbidding voice trembled at the end with suppressed anger and latent agitation.

Gaunt shrugged.

"Then, you will not tell me?" he insisted. "You will permit me to use your telephone? I must get my secretary on the wire."

There was an exclamation of annoyance from Mrs. Appleton, and the nervous tapping on the chair-arms quickened for a moment, then ceased abruptly, as, after a moment's pause, she spoke:

"Of course, if you insist, Mr. Gaunt, I will tell you. It is nothing but what all the world knows, and it is a maddening waste of time; but I presume you must pursue your own method. My husband was an old-fashioned man, and the mode of life adopted by our two sons angered him to the extreme. I disapprove most strongly, of course, of the looseness of the lives of young men nowadays; but I knew that my sons were merely wild, not evil, and would in time marry suitably and settle down. My husband took an opposite view, and vowed he would leave his fortune in trust for them, that they might never have an opportunity to squander the principal. When, however, my eldest

son, Garret, became infatuated with Natalie Ellerslie, and married her, my husband took an absurd fancy to her, and felt that Garret's future was safe in her hands; that she would, as he expressed, 'make a man of him.'

"My own fortune was assured by an ante-nuptial agreement, and my husband left a miserable pittance—considering his great wealth—to Yates, and that in trust for him for life, with the Mammoth Trust Company, that he might never touch any part of it but the interest. The rest of his estate my husband divided into halves, giving one share to Garret outright, the other portion to be held in trust by the Mammoth Company, together with its accruing interest for ten years. If, at the end of that period, Natalie had borne no child, that portion was to be divided, and one-half of it given outright to each of the brothers. If, on the other hand, Natalie had given birth to a child, or children, the Mammoth Company was to hold that part of the estate, not its interest, until the children were twenty-one, and then divide it among them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly."

"It was a most unfair arrangement, as you can see, and naturally Yates resented it. A few months ago, when it became an assured fact that there was to be a child, Yates brought suit—an entirely friendly suit, I assure you, Mr. Gaunt—jointly against his brother and the Trust Company, to

obtain his rightful share of the property and full control of it. It was merely to test the validity of the will, of course, and Yates lost. That is absolutely all there is in the story."

"The suit was entirely friendly? There had been no serious quarrels preceding it?"

"Oh, little discussions, of course; but only such as occur in all families over money matters. The suit was brought as a perfectly amicable arrangement of them. You can understand that we—Yates and I—would not be living here under my eldest son's roof had it been otherwise."

"Ah! Then, you sided with your youngest son in the matter, Mrs. Appleton?"

There was a rustle as the lady gave a start of annoyance at her involuntary slip, and the rapid rat-tat of the finger-tips upon the polished wood was resumed.

"I sided with neither—there was no need. I have told you repeatedly that it was a perfectly amicable family arrangement."

"Has this sudden tragedy affected your plans for the immediate future, Mrs. Appleton?"

Again the tapping ceased.

"Naturally, in the face of the attitude adopted by my daughter-in-law and her sister, my son and I will not remain another night under this roof. This afternoon, I shall go to the Blenheim Hotel, to remain there until my own house is ready to receive me. An hour ago, my son made arrange-

ments, by means of the telephone, to take over the bachelor apartments of a friend, in the Calthorp."

"Ah! Mrs. Appleton, you approve of this move of your son's?"

"I? Approve?" the lady's voice was almost shrill in her astonishment at the sudden question; but her fingers unconsciously began for the third time their agitated betrayal upon the sounding-boards of the chair-arms. "I cannot understand your question, Mr. Gaunt. My son is no longer a child. His personal plans are his own. Whether he chooses to go to the Calthorp, or elsewhere, is of small moment to me."

"Then, it is because of another reason that your son is the cause of some particular anxiety to you, just now?"

"Mr. Gaunt, your line of questioning is not only senselessly irrelevant, it is impertinent!" Her indignation was growing beyond the bounds of her studied self-control.

But the detective returned, imperturbably.

"Every time, during our present interview, Mrs. Appleton, when my 'line of questioning,' as you term it, has led toward your youngest son, you have unmistakably betrayed your agitation."

"My agitation? Would I, would any mother, not be agitated at such a time as this, when her eldest son lies dead, foully murdered, almost at her feet? But you are laboring under a strange

delusion, if you imagine that I am especially perturbed at the mention of my youngest son. Why should such a thought have entered your mind?"

For answer, he tapped lightly, but with sharp insistence, on the arms of his own chair, and, after an instant, she comprehended.

"How absurd!" she ejaculated, with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders; but there was a little running note of apprehension in her voice. "You are super-analytical, Mr. Gaunt. Are there any further questions you desired to ask me? I need scarcely remind you again that time presses."

If he could only have seen her knuckles whiten, as she clasped her hands in her lap, so convulsively that the heavy rings cut cruelly into her wrinkled fingers, he might perhaps have pressed the matter in spite of her evident displeasure, but instead, he branched off upon a new subject of inquiry.

"Mrs. Appleton, was your eldest son ever, to your knowledge, in fear of his life? Had he any active enemy?"

Mrs. Appleton opened her lips for an indignant denial, when there came an unexpected interruption. There was a sudden commotion in the hall, the door was flung open, and a girl's voice was heard in a shrill cry of horror. The next moment, someone entered precipitately, with a swirl of silken skirts, and flung herself upon the elder woman.

At the same instant, a whiff of cloying Oriental perfume, like incense, was wafted to the sensitive nostrils of Gaunt.

"What is this we have heard?" the same sharp young voice cried out. "Mrs. Appleton, what is it that has happened? We have heard horrible rumors—they cannot be true! Is Garret—"

"My dear child! My dear Doris!" the voice held more a warning than an appeal for sympathy. "Garret is dead! He was found, shot, in his den this morning! I know how badly you feel for us all, but you must calm yourself. You see how I am bearing up under the blow. This is no time for breaking down." The cautious note seemed suddenly to deepen in significance. "I am talking to Mr. Gaunt, whom I have retained to investigate this terrible affair for us. Mr. Gaunt, this young lady is the daughter of an old family friend, Judge Carhart."

"Garret dead!" The girl's voice trembled. "I cannot believe it! I cannot realize it! Dead! And only last night—" The voice ceased, with a little, quick catch of the breath. Had she paused because of the fear that she would break down under the stress of shock and sympathetic emotion, or because of a warning gesture, a pressure of the arm, perhaps, from Mrs. Appleton?

"Judge Carhart and his daughter dined with us last evening," the elder woman's smooth, hard voice explained carefully. "Garret was well and

in the best of spirits. It is difficult for the young to realize—”

“My dear Catherine! My poor old friend!” a rich, full-toned fatherly voice sounded from the doorway. “We have come, Doris and I, to utter what consolation we may, and give you and yours what aid lies in our power!”

“Ah, Judge Carhart, I am so very glad to see you!” Mrs. Appleton’s tones for the first time rang with a warm human note. “Come in, please, This is Mr. Gaunt, of whom you have doubtless heard. I called him in at once.”

“Mr. Gaunt!” The detective’s hand was grasped cordially. “My old friend is fortunate to have obtained your services. Your work, sir, in the Marbridge case, and the Delamater murders, came under my judicial notice, and commanded my admiration. But you were in consultation with Mrs. Appleton. My daughter and I will withdraw.”

“By no means, Judge Carhart. My interview was almost at an end, and I should like to put a question or so to you, if I may. I understand you and Miss Carhart dined here last evening.”

“We did, sir.”

“There were other guests?”

“No.” It was Mrs. Appleton who replied. “Only our family, the Judge, and his daughter.”

“Did you notice anything unusual in Mr. Appleton’s—Mr. Garret Appleton’s—appearance, or manner, during the evening, Judge Carhart?”

"No, nothing whatever," the Judge's tone held a hint of astonishment at the question. "Did you, Doris?"

The girl caught her breath suddenly, with a little hiss, then replied in a low, studiously controlled tone.

"No, daddy, of course not. Why should there have been?"

"Mr. Gaunt, Coroner Hildebrand would like to speak to you." It was Yates Appleton's voice, breaking in upon them.

"Ask him to come in here—and you, too, Mr. Appleton." Gaunt leaned forward in his chair.

Young Mr. Appleton entered, followed by the Coroner, who remained standing just within the door, eying the detective somewhat doubtfully.

"Coroner, the autopsy has been performed?" Gaunt asked, sharply. "You have abstracted the bullet? I should like to know at once in the presence of Judge Carhart and these members of the family."

"It was fired from a thirty-two-caliber revolver, Mr. Gaunt."

"A thirty-two—a thirty-two!" the detective repeated, thoughtfully. Then, he wheeled suddenly toward where the younger son was standing.

"Mr. Appleton, did your brother possess a revolver?"

"Certainly not!" the mother cut in harshly, before her son could answer. "What could lead you

to suppose that Garret should have such a thing in his possession?"

"Did he?" Gaunt persisted quietly, of the young man. "It is not uncommon, you know, for gentlemen to keep such a weapon in their homes, to guard against burglars and the like. Have you ever seen a revolver in your brother's hands?"

"I—I believe he did have one somewhere, now that I think of it," Yates Appleton admitted, sullenly. There was a quick sharp exclamation from his mother; but no one, save perhaps the detective, noted it.

"Was it of thirty-two caliber?"

"I don't know. I—I never noticed it particularly."

"Did your brother ever fire it?"

"Not that I know of."

"Did anyone else ever handle it?"

"I never saw anybody. My brother had it a long time. I don't know why he got it—probably for protection against burglars, as you say. I don't even know that it was ever loaded."

"Where did he keep it?"

"I haven't the least idea. It's months since I saw it."

"Where did you see it last?"

The questions were pelted pitilessly at him, and he was visibly writhing about under them. At the last one, he blurted out desperately:

"In the—the den."

"Will you go, please, and bring it here?"

"I don't know where it is, I tell you!" he almost shouted, the perspiration standing out in great beads on his forehead.

"Will you go to the den, and look for it?" Then, as the young man seemed to hesitate, he added: "Mr. Appleton's body has been removed."

With a sudden movement, Yates Appleton turned and bolted from the room, and those within it sat in a tense silence, waiting.

Finally, there was an exclamation, almost a shout, from down the hall, and the young man rushed in.

"It's gone!" he cried. "Someone's taken it! It's gone from the drawer, where he always kept it!"

Damon Gaunt reached in his hip-pocket, and drew forth something, which he held out.

"Is this it?" he asked, quietly.

Yates Appleton snatched it from his hands.

"Let me see!" he bent, trembling, over it. Then, he turned roughly upon the detective. "Yes, by gad, it is! And you're a fool if you think it had anything to do with the murder! It's fully loaded! Here! You can see for yourself!" He thrust it into the Coroner's hands.

"Yes, it's fully loaded," Grant conceded, steadily. "But it has been lately fired, and reloaded—within a few hours, perhaps. An attempt has been made to clean it, but not thoroughly. It still reeks of powder."

"Where did you get it?" Yates Appleton demanded, furiously.

"In the drawer in the library table, where you say your brother always kept it; in the drawer where it was placed in the early hours of this morning, by the hand which reloaded and cleaned it—the same hand which pried open the catch of the window from the inside, and smeared the curtains with the blood of a man long dead. The weapon which was the instrument of death was Garret Appleton's own revolver!"

CHAPTER III

LIES

THERE was a moment of electrified silence, and then Mrs. Finlay Appleton arose majestically to her feet.

“Mr. Gaunt, do you mean to imply that my son committed suicide, and that someone else, coming upon his body hours afterward, attempted to conceal the evidence of his act, and to create a false impression of theft and murder? You go too far, sir! Such a deduction is that of a mind, to say the least, gone astray!”

“I imply nothing of the sort, Mrs. Appleton. I assert that your son was killed by some person, at present unknown, who did not enter by way of the window; and that the murderer, or someone else, coming by chance upon the body, sought to convey a false impression of the manner of your son’s death. That is the case as it stands now.”

“I cannot believe it! It is preposterous—unthinkable! Why should anyone do such a thing? What motive could there be? No one in my household could be capable of it! I trust my servants implicitly!” The dominant woman had forgotten

for the moment that it was of her daughter-in-law's house she spoke, her daughter-in-law's servants.

"Good God!" Yates Appleton ejaculated in a low tone. He was wiping his forehead, and staring at the detective with something akin to horror in his eyes.

"Mr. Appleton," Gaunt turned to him, "your mother tells me that you and she are planning to leave this house today; I should like a word in private with you before you go."

"Y-yes, Mr. Gaunt. Perhaps you'll come to my room? My man is packing there now; but I'll dismiss him—"

"I'll come presently, when I've had a word with the Coroner."

The Judge had turned to Mrs. Appleton, and was saying softly:

"You are leaving this house—leaving Natalie in her grief?"

"Her grief is not overwhelming, my dear friend. There is no need of pretense to you. She's merely hysterical now, and Barbara is taking care of her."

"But, Catherine, is it wise? Is it—politic?"

"I don't know. I know the house is horrible to me; that I could not spend another night in it!"

The Judge sighed.

"Could I speak to Natalie for a moment, do you think?"

"I'll see." Mrs. Appleton swept from the room

as if glad to escape even momentarily from Gaunt's presence, and the Judge turned to where his daughter, with white, set face and staring eyes, crouched in the window-seat.

Meanwhile, the Coroner said in a low, excited tone:

"You're sure of what you said, Mr. Gaunt? That was a pretty strong statement you made. After all, you know, you've the merest circumstantial evidence to go on."

"Good heavens, man! Don't the facts bear me out so far? And I made that statement as openly as I did, for a good and sufficient reason. Be sure you keep that revolver from being handled too much. You'll need the powder-traces on it as evidence, later."

"Judge Carhart, if you will come with me—" Mrs. Appleton's voice came from just behind them, "Natalie would like to see you for a moment."

When the Judge had left the room, the Coroner, too, departed, and Gaunt crossed to where the slim, still figure was seated among the cushions.

"You—you're blind aren't you, Mr. Gaunt?" the girl asked curiously, but not unkindly. "How did you know where I was sitting?"

"By your perfume, Miss Carhart," he replied, with a smile. "You know, we who are bereft of one sense must train the others to act for us in place of the one we have lost. That perfume is very strange, unusual."

"Yes. My father has it sent from India. He used to get it for my mother. It has an unpronounceable name, meaning 'The Rose in Death.' She shivered a little at the last word, then went on hurriedly: "It is supposed to be very, very old. I believe it was first distilled for the queen in whose memory the Taj-Mahal was built. . . . But tell me, Mr. Gaunt, is it really true that Garret—that Mr. Appleton was—murdered? Even after hearing what you have all just said, I cannot believe it."

"He is dead," Gaunt answered, gently. "By whose hand we have yet to learn. Try to recall everything that happened last evening, every little, trivial incident, which may have slipped your memory. There was nothing—not a word or a look from anyone out of the ordinary?"

"I can't think—you frighten me so, Mr. Gaunt! You make me feel as if you suspected every one of us! Surely, it was a burglar, was it not? Mr. Appleton's money and jewelry are also gone, they say. Oh, what does it all mean? Who can have done it?"

"Try to calm yourself, Miss Carhart, and collect your thoughts, and tell me exactly what happened last evening—everything which you can remember."

"Why, we dined—just a simple family dinner—you know, we're all awfully old friends—Mrs. Appleton, and my father, and Garret and his wife, and Miss Ellerslie, and Yates, and I. And

then, afterward—let me see. Oh, yes, Miss Ellerslie went to a wedding with a party of friends, who called for her—”

“A wedding?”

“Yes. An old friend from the South, I believe. And Yates went out, too. Mrs. Appleton and father played double-dummy bridge, and Garret and his wife and I chatted for awhile. Then Garret’s wife said she wasn’t feeling very well, and excused herself and went up-stairs, and Garret and I sat and talked until father and Mrs Appleton finished their game, and we went home. That is all.”

“What time did you leave?”

“Oh, early—between eleven and half-past, I think.”

“And on your arrival home?”

“Father went to his study for a last cigar, and I went right up to bed, and read for an hour or two before I fell asleep. We weren’t going on anywhere else. It’s too early in the season for dances and that sort of thing, you know.”

“I understand. Miss Carhart,” he bent forward suddenly, as if to look into her face through his sightless eyes, and shot the question at her, “at what hour during the evening, and with whom, were you in the den?”

She shrank from him, her breath coming in great gasps.

“The—den?” she faltered, through dry lips.

"The room in which Garret Appleton was afterward murdered," he persisted, inexorably.

"The—den!" she repeated. "Why, never—not once—not for an instant! I swear it!"

The detective drew back.

"Oh!" he muttered. "You said that you and young Mrs. Appleton and her husband sat chatting, while your father and the elder Mrs. Appleton played bridge. I thought perhaps you were in the den."

Miss Carhart drew a deep breath.

"Oh, no!" she said, hastily. "We were in the library."

He could feel her eyes upon him, deep and bright with suspicion.

"You say that young Mrs. Appleton was not well. Did she seem depressed, or unhappy?"

The sudden change of topic had the desired effect.

"How should I know?" the girl drew herself up coldly. "I did not notice her particularly. She seemed quite as usual."

"I thought perhaps you would have noticed. I understood you were great friends."

"I meant that my father and I were great friends of the Appleton family. I only know Garret's wife and her sister casually, not intimately."

"Well, Miss Carhart, I must leave you. No doubt Mrs. Appleton will return almost immediately with your father, and I must interview the servants. Thank you for [replying to my questions."

He turned gropingly, with outstretched hands, as if feeling for the door from which he had come to her with such unerring precision, and his hand came in contact with her head just where her hair billowed out from under her hat. He withdrew it at once, with a deprecatingly murmured apology, and, with an odd lack of his usual accuracy, fumbled for the door. On the sill, he paused, stopped, and picked up a filmy square of lace, so tiny that it had lain unnoticed in the general excitement by those who had passed over it. He turned, and walked straight back to where the girl sat watching him, with curious, fascinated eyes.

"Your handkerchief, I believe?" he asked, smilingly presenting it. "You must have dropped it when you entered."

Miss Carhart took it from his hand, glanced at it, and then swiftly back to his face, and her eyes were dark with apprehension.

"Thank you, it is mine," she said quietly. "But—how did you know?"

"The perfume," he explained, with courteous, but wearied, patience. "Wherever you are, wherever any personal article of yours lies, that individual, penetrating scent of yours would lead unmistakably to you. And then, too, if I am not mistaken, I felt the monogram D. C. in a corner of the handkerchief. Mrs. Appleton called you 'Doris.' It is quite simple, you see. Good-morning, Miss Carhart."

As he made his way slowly along the unfamiliar

hall, he pondered. She had been in the den sometime the previous evening. The lingering, cloying perfume was unmistakable. Why had she denied it?

A man-servant passed through the hall, and, seeing him, approached deferentially.

"Mr. Gaunt, sir? Were you going to Mr. Appleton's room? He expects you. I'm his man, sir. Shall I show you the way?"

"If you will, please. But where were you going just now?"

"To the kitchen, sir, with this tray."

"Tray?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Yates Appleton's breakfast-tray."

The man's perceptible pause before the word "breakfast" was illuminating, but unnecessarily so to Gaunt.

"That is not a breakfast-tray, my man, unless your master partook of a most injudicious meal. He'd better not have anything more to drink today, if you can keep it away from him."

"Drink, sir? How—how did you know?" the valet stammered, the shaking tray almost slipping from his hands.

"From the tinkle of ice in the glass, and that purring sound of gas in the siphon. If that tray had been more heavily laden—with dishes, for instance—I should have heard them clink together, also, as you came toward me down the hall. What is your name?"

"James, sir."

"Well, James, at what hour did your master return home last night, or, rather, this morning?"

"At about three o'clock, sir."

"How do you know? Did you wait up for him?"

"Yes, sir. I mostly do, sir. It—it isn't often that he can get to bed by himself, sir." The man spoke apologetically, but with eager frankness. Evidently, he stood much in awe of his inquisitor.

"I understand. And in what condition was your master when he returned this morning?"

"About as usual. Quite—quite under the weather, so to speak, but not what you might call bad, sir. . . . This is his door."

James coughed discreetly, and knocked, and an irritable, highly strung voice bade him enter.

"Mr. Gaunt, sir," announced James, and departed swiftly and noiselessly.

"Oh!" said Yates Appleton, with a noticeable change of tone. "Come in, Mr. Gaunt. What is it you want to ask me? I'm afraid I've told you everything I know."

"I'd like to know what jewelry was taken from your brother's body," was the opening remark, which evidently surprised the younger man by its tenor.

"Oh, I've already given a list to Inspector Hanrahan, as nearly as I can remember, and Garret's man can tell me."

"Still, I should like to have you repeat it to me," the detective reiterated, patiently.

"Pearl studs, pearl and mother-of-pearl vest-buttons and cuff-buttons, a small gold watch, thin gold cigarette-case, and a small seal purse. That's all, I think."

"All? No small jeweled pin, or insignia of some sort?"

Yates Appleton's knuckles cracked suddenly, as he gripped the back of a high carved chair upon which he was leaning.

"Pin? I never thought of that! He did have some such thing, I believe. Frat' pin, from his university days, I imagine, although I never inquired. He was superstitious about it, and wouldn't go without it; but in dinner-clothes—"

"He wore it pinned inside his vest-pocket, in evening-clothes, didn't he?"

"Yes," Yates Appleton gasped, and looked his perturbed astonishment. "By Jove! I remember now, I've seen him pin it there once or twice, or under the lapel of his coat. Silly of him; but, as I say, he was superstitious about it. I'd like to know how you found it out, Mr. Gaunt. Hardly anybody knew about it."

"The thief did," Gaunt observed, quietly. "Rather unusual, wasn't it? The man who robbed and murdered him evidently was someone who knew him and his habits thoroughly—or else had nerve enough, after firing a shot, which, had it

been heard, would have brought the whole house about his ears, to search his victim's clothes with the most minute detail."

"Hum-m! I never thought of that," the young man answered, thoughtfully.

"What did you do last evening, Mr. Appleton? You went out immediately after dinner, did you not?"

"Almost immediately. Family parties always bore me."

"Where did you go?"

"To the club first—the Patriarch's, for awhile. Met some chaps I knew, and played cards, and had a few drinks. Then, I drove around in the car for awhile, and—and—"

"And then?"

"Then, I went to the rooms of a fellow I know, and he came out with me."

"Where?"

"Oh, we rode around some more in the car, and stopped at various places for drinks. Then, I left him at his rooms, and came home to bed myself."

"At what time did you leave the club?"

"The club? Oh, I don't know—at about half-past twelve."

"And when did you reach your friend's rooms?"

"About one."

"Your friend can verify that?"

"Yes, and the door-man at the club can verify

the time I left there, if necessary, as you very well know. Good heavens, man! you don't suspect me of murdering my own brother, do you?" He spoke with the irritability of nerves worn to the breaking point.

"My dear Mr. Appleton, this is merely a matter of form, you know. No one suspects you, of course; but the police will go into this much more rigorously, if I don't. They must know where every member of this household was at every moment last night. . . . Are your friend's rooms near the club?"

"Within five minutes, in the motor car." The young man spoke sullenly, but more quietly.

"So that, after leaving the club, you only drove around by yourself for about twenty minutes?"

"Yes. I was coming home, and then I—changed my mind."

"At what time did you finally reach home?"

"I don't know—about three, I suppose."

"And you heard or saw nothing unusual?"

"No. James was waiting up for me, in my dressing-room, and I went straight to bed. I was feeling a—little tight."

"I understand. Now, Mr. Appleton, will you give me your friend's name and address, please?"

"Maurice Livingston, Bryant Chambers," the young man returned, sullenly.

"Mr. Appleton, what is that strong odor of witch-hazel I smell?"

"My hand—I hurt it. My man's been dressing it for me."

"How did you hurt it?"

"Bruised it—got caught in the door of the car last night."

"When?"

"I don't know. I was tight, I tell you—intoxicated, if you like that better! I only noticed it this morning."

"Well, Mr. Appleton, I won't keep you much longer. I wonder if you know of any enemies your brother may have made—if he feared anyone, feared an attack of some sort?"

"Lord, no! He wasn't man enough to make enemies," the affectionate brother returned, "not bad enough enemies to want to take his life; although there were lots who hated him, and a few who would have been glad to have him out of the way."

"Out of the way? Whom do you mean by that, Mr. Appleton?" the detective spoke peremptorily, and the other man squirmed uneasily.

"Oh, I don't know!" he blundered. "There's a chap whose rather gone on Natalie. Not that she's ever given him any encouragement, that I've noticed; but you never can tell about these sly ones. She was jealous, and always rowing Garret, you know, and playing the ill-used wife, and bleating to Barbara about it, and maybe she worked on this fellow's sympathies. He's one of the intense, quiet kind. Perhaps he'll think there's

a chance for him, now. I fancy he won't be sorry, for one, that Garret's gone."

"What is the man's name?"

"Harmon Witherspoon. He lives down in the old Witherspoon Mansion, on Washington Square."

"Well, Mr. Appleton, I won't detain you any longer." Gaunt rose. "If I need you again, I shall find you at your rooms—the Calthorp, isn't it?"

"Yes. I am going straight there. This house is getting on my nerves."

"Will you please ring for a servant, and have me conducted to the drawing-room or library? I want to interview Miss Ellerslie."

"I'll take you myself. The library'd be best." Yates Appleton pressed the button in the wall with alacrity, as if glad the searching interview was over. "James," he added, when the man appeared, "send someone to tell Miss Ellerslie that Mr. Gaunt would like to speak to her in the library."

In the great entrance-hall, at the foot of the stairs, however, they were halted by the Inspector.

"Mr. Gaunt, I'd like to speak to you for a minute please. Were you going anywhere, special?"

"To the library, to interview Miss Ellerslie," the detective replied.

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll show you the way myself, after I've had a word with you."

Inspector Hanrahan waited until Mr. Yates Appleton was up the stairs and well out of ear-shot, before he spoke again.

"It's about the autopsy, Mr. Gaunt. They found the bullet, as you know; but they found something else, too. It is a bruise on the left shoulder, high up near the neck, as if it was a blow aimed at the heart, and wide of the mark. As sure as you're alive, Mr. Gaunt, someone hit him a blow! That looks like a struggle, don't it? That looks as if he'd tried to defend himself, and been worsted. Sort of knocks your theory that he just sat still and let himself be done to death, don't it?"

"It looks like it, Inspector," Gaunt answered with a slight smile, which gave no hint of the tumult of his thoughts. "Any other marks on the body?"

"None but the bullet-wound," the Inspector returned, briefly. "But this is the darndest case I ever struck in my life, Mr. Gaunt. Who killed him, and why did they come back hours later and fix up that window stunt?"

"That's what we're here to find out. Been after any more of the servants?"

"Yes; but it's no good. Katie, the housemaid that was stuck on Louis, Mr. Appleton's man, won't admit a thing, and Maggie, the blatherskite of a cook, won't do anything but weep, and wail, and bemoan the day she left Ireland. I'm going to get after Dakers, the butler, again. He's smooth and polite, and slick as they come; but I have an idea that fellow's got something up his sleeve."

"All right, Inspector. By the way, would you

mind telling me what color hair this is? It's golden, isn't it?" He pulled the strand of hair from his vest-pocket as he spoke.

"Sure, it's golden, right enough." The Inspector's tone was full of honest wonder. "How'd you know?"

"By the texture. I can tell the color of most hair by the feel of it between my fingers—not the difference between the finer shadings, perhaps, but the general tone."

"It beats me how you do it! But where did you get it?"

"Never mind that now. I'll tell you if it turns out to be important. Here comes Miss Ellerslie. Let me know later if you learn anything."

"Miss Ellerslie? She ain't coming yet, Mr. Gaunt. There ain't a soul in sight."

"I hear her footstep in the hall above. There! She's just at the head of the stairs."

The Inspector glanced up involuntarily, and saw a slight, gray-clad figure.

"Holy Virgin!" he muttered to himself, stepping back, with round eyes full of wonder on the man before him. "This is the library, here on your right," he added hurriedly, and departed, all but crossing himself as he went.

"You wished to see me, Mr. Gaunt?" the low, sweet, pulsing voice sounded upon his ears, and Barbara Ellerslie led the way into the library. "I shall be glad to tell you anything I can."

"Your sister, Mrs. Appleton—how is she?" Gaunt asked, for once at a loss how to lead up to the subject he must inquire into. The nearness of this strange, magnetic woman, the poignancy of her, was as oddly disturbing as the vibrations of the violin-like tones. She seemed to radiate a suggestion of limitless power in her perfect self-containment, of glowing health, of body and mind, and soul, in her easy poise and control.

"She is better. The first reaction from the shock has gone, and she is quieter. She will be able to see you later, for a few moments, if you wish. But, please, be very gentle with her, Mr. Gaunt." The low voice sank even lower, as he was later to know was its wont, when anything that touched her very deeply was uttered. "She is not well, not over-strong at best, and now she is in a delicate condition. She has had much to endure, and it culminated in the shock of this morning's tragedy. Please, be very—kind to her."

"I will," the detective found himself promising, almost vehemently. "I shall not annoy her any more than I can possibly help, and I shall try to say nothing to grieve or excite her."

"Thank you." The voice was a mere tremulous breath; but she must have leaned toward him, involuntarily, for the clean, pure fragrance of her hair and body, free from the taint of cloying scents and acrid perfumes, stole over his senses, and seemed to numb them. With an effort of his will,

he pulled himself together, and spoke in a tone more stern than he had meant, to cover his own confusion and bewilderment at himself.

"But in order to spare your sister, Miss Ellerslie, I must ask you to answer my questions without reservation. You went out immediately after dinner, last evening?"

"Yes, to a wedding—a very quiet one, that of an old schoolmate. I went with friends, and returned quite late."

"At what time?"

"About one o'clock."

"Did you retire at once?"

"No. My sister's maid and mine—an old mammy, whom we brought with us from our home—was waiting up for me, and she said that Natalie was awake, and very nervous. Without waiting to disrobe, I went in and talked with her for some time, until she quieted down, and almost slept. Then, I returned to my room."

"You retired immediately?"

"Yes."

"You were, therefore, not in or near the den from the time dinner was over, either before you went out, or after your return, until this morning, when the discovery of Mr. Appleton's body aroused the house?"

"No, Mr. Gaunt."

CHAPTER IV

THE SISTERS

“YOU are sure?” the detective asked, slowly. The girl turned, and regarded him deliberately, as if she could read in his sightless eyes the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

“Why do you ask me that so persistently, Mr. Gaunt? I was not in or near the den yesterday, or last night. Had I been, I should have no reason for concealing the fact from you.”

“I thought that perhaps you might have forgotten,” he replied, with unusual hesitancy. “It is important that I should know who of this household visited that room, on no matter how innocent an errand, during the hours preceding Garret Appleton’s death. You heard nothing unusual on your return, nor at any time during the night?”

“No, Mr. Gaunt; and I am a very light sleeper, as is my sister. I cannot understand why the— sound of that revolver-shot did not arouse someone, at least, in all this house.”

“That is not unusual. The police records are full of murder and suicide cases in crowded apartment houses and tenements, where no one happens to hear the shot fired, or, if they are awakened

suddenly by something, do not take the trouble to investigate, since all seems then to be quiet around them. But tell me, please: The first idea you had of the murder was when you were awakened by the screams of the maid who discovered the body?"

"Yes. At first, when the terrible, piercing shrieks awakened me, I thought the house was on fire. I thrust my feet into slippers, flung a heavy robe about my shoulders, and rushed for my sister's room. In the hall, however, it was borne in upon my consciousness that the voice was crying 'Murder!' not 'Fire!' and, not knowing what it was, but remembering my sister's delicate condition, I felt that I must stop those awful screams before she was disturbed, if possible, and frightened half out of her senses. I turned and ran downstairs, following the direction of the cries, until I came to the den. You know what I found there."

"Who else of the household was there before you?"

"The housemaid, Katie, of course. She it was who had discovered the body. Maggie, the cook; Dakers, the butler; James, Mr. Yates Appleton's man; and Mrs. Finlay Appleton's maid, Marie."

"What was their condition?"

"I don't remember, Mr. Gaunt, I didn't notice very much. I was appalled, stunned, by the sight of my brother-in-law's body. The maids were in

hysterics, of course, and the butler in a state of collapse. I remember seeing him crouched against the wall, with his face buried in his hands, and James standing over him, shaking his shoulder, and I think he kept repeating: 'You fool! You fool!' but I cannot be sure. It is all like a horrible dream. Then—then the rest came—the family."

"Which of them appeared first?"

"I don't know. I only remember my little sister sobbing and shuddering in my arms, and Mrs. Finlay Appleton standing there with her gray hair all disheveled and her face as rigid as a death-mask, staring down at the body of her son. I only know that Yates appeared last, hanging to the door-casing, as if he was afraid to enter the room, and staring—staring horribly. Then—" the low voice sank to a throbbing whisper, and ceased.

"Then—what?" Gaunt urged, gently.

"Then—Mrs. Appleton seemed to realize his presence, and she turned and spoke to him, and, at her voice, he broke down and wept. Afterward, when he was calmer, she sent him to dress and go for you. Meantime, the butler had been ordered to notify the police, and the officer and Inspector came, and afterward the Coroner. The rest you know."

"Miss Ellerslie," the detective's voice was very gentle, "you have lived North with your sister since her marriage?"

"No; only for the last year. I would have



"I only remember my little sister sobbing and shuddering
in my arms."

preferred living in my home in the South, but my sister wanted me—needed me.”

“I understand,” Gaunt returned. “I have had an interview with Mrs. Finlay Appleton.”

The low voice took on a saddened, weary tone, inexpressibly pathetic.

“Ah! Then you know all, and more, than I can tell you. Mrs. Appleton considers us interlopers, almost adventuresses. Her dearest matrimonial plans and ambitions for her eldest son were shattered when he met my sister, and she has never forgiven it, and never will. He—Garret—came down to the Horse Show at Louisville with Brooks Guernsey, in his private car. We—my sister and I—were orphans. Our three brothers were dead, too, and we were living with our uncle, a veteran horseman, near Louisville. Garret fell in love with my sister, and she was fascinated by him. He was better-looking then, dissipation hadn’t left any appreciable traces upon his face, and I think she was dazzled by his wealth and social position. He was a sort of fairy-prince to her, poor child! She was only eighteen. I am four years older. . . . But all this is irrelevant, isn’t it?”

“No; go on, please. I want to hear everything.”

“She married him, then, and came North, and at first her letters were glowing. Later, she couldn’t keep her increasing unhappiness from straying into them, and at last she begged me to come to her. I came, and saw the situation, and—I stayed. I

knew I was unwelcome, detested—oh, you can imagine my almost unbearable position! But I would not leave her, I would not be driven away, because she clung to me, and we two were alone in the world. My uncle, our last living relative, died just after I came to New York.

“Garret’s people, and Garret himself, hated me, because I stood between her and what persecution I was able to. We hoped—she and I—that, when they knew she was going to have a child, they would be more kind. Garret was utterly indifferent; he was quite tired of her, longing to turn back to a woman—but I must not speak of that! As for Mrs. Appleton and Yates, they were wild with rage. You understand, Mr. Gaunt, that the birth of a child to Garret and Natalie robs Yates of his full share of his father’s fortune, and he is the favorite of his mother. That was the condition of affairs up to Garret’s—death.”

“A most unfortunate state of things, Miss Ellerslie,” Gaunt said, sympathetically. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, he added: “This is a delicate question, but I must get at the root of the matter, and only you can help me. Do you think—please don’t misunderstand me; I impute nothing against the purity of your sister—but is it not possible that she may have known a change of heart since her marriage?”

“A change of heart?” the girl repeated. Then, her tones deepened, and grew husky, and trembled

with contemptuous indignation as she added: "Ah! I see what you mean! They have even dared to imply that! That, too, was to have been a part—" She broke off suddenly, breathing quickly in great gasps, her perfect control for once shaken. After a pause, which the detective dared not break, she went on in a more even voice:

"My sister could scarcely find warm love in her heart for a man who used her as Garret Appleton did. Her girlhood dream of the fairy-prince was shattered forever. But she was the essence, the soul, of loyalty. Had I not been able to read between the lines of her unconscious confessions, I should never have known from her letters what misery she was enduring before I came, and she has lied to me valiantly, when I found great bruises and marks upon her arms and body, until lying was no longer possible. She does not complain to anyone, it would be against every attribute of her nature; but people who frequent the house could not be altogether blind to the conditions that existed here. There is one man who has been sympathetic. It may be that he loves her—I do not know; but I am sure he has always shown her the honor and respect due to another man's wife, else she would have forbidden him the house, and—she would have told me. She is impetuous, warm-hearted, perhaps a little volatile in some superficial ways; but there is nothing low or intriguing, nothing dishonorable, in her nature."

"And you, yourself, Miss Ellerslie? You have no plans for the future?"

He heard the soft rustle of her gown as she made a sudden, startled movement; then her hands fell quietly in her lap.

"My engagement to Mr. Randolph Force, you mean?" she queried, her voice lingering over the name in an involuntary caress as she spoke.

The detective did not allow his surprise at this hitherto undisclosed fact to manifest itself in his face.

"That is a thing of the past. We were to have been married this autumn; but I would not leave my sister, in her sad condition. Now, it shall be never. I shall marry no one. When this tragic mystery is solved, or buried in oblivion, I shall take her away from this dreadful house, back to our home in the South, and try to help her to forget these three awful years. There will only be her little child to remind her, and it may in time become a real comfort and solace to her."

"But you?" exclaimed the detective. "Why have you broken your engagement, Miss Ellerslie?"

"I *shall* break it," she returned, with a hint of withdrawal, of aloofness, in her tones; "because, let us say, I have experienced a 'change of heart'—at any rate, that has nothing to do with the present case, Mr. Gaunt."

"I beg your pardon," he said, rising. "I had no desire to seem impertinent. I have one last re-

quest to make of you: Will you allow me to touch your hair? I know this must seem strange to you; but we who are blind see mostly with our fingers, you know. I am anxious to know the color and texture of your hair."

"It is red," she replied, in a puzzled tone, "plain, unmitigated red. My sister's is golden. But—yes, you may feel it, if you like."

Upon his frank mention of his affliction, her resentment at his apparent prying into that which lay nearest her heart had vanished, and her gentle voice betrayed a deeply compassionate timbre which reached to the man's very heart-strings, as no pity, no tenderness, had ever done in all his clouded life.

She leaned forward again, and once more the clean, pure fragrance of her assailed him. He placed his hand for an instant upon her soft hair, and then withdrew it instantly, in a manner that gave no hint of anything save the purely impersonal.

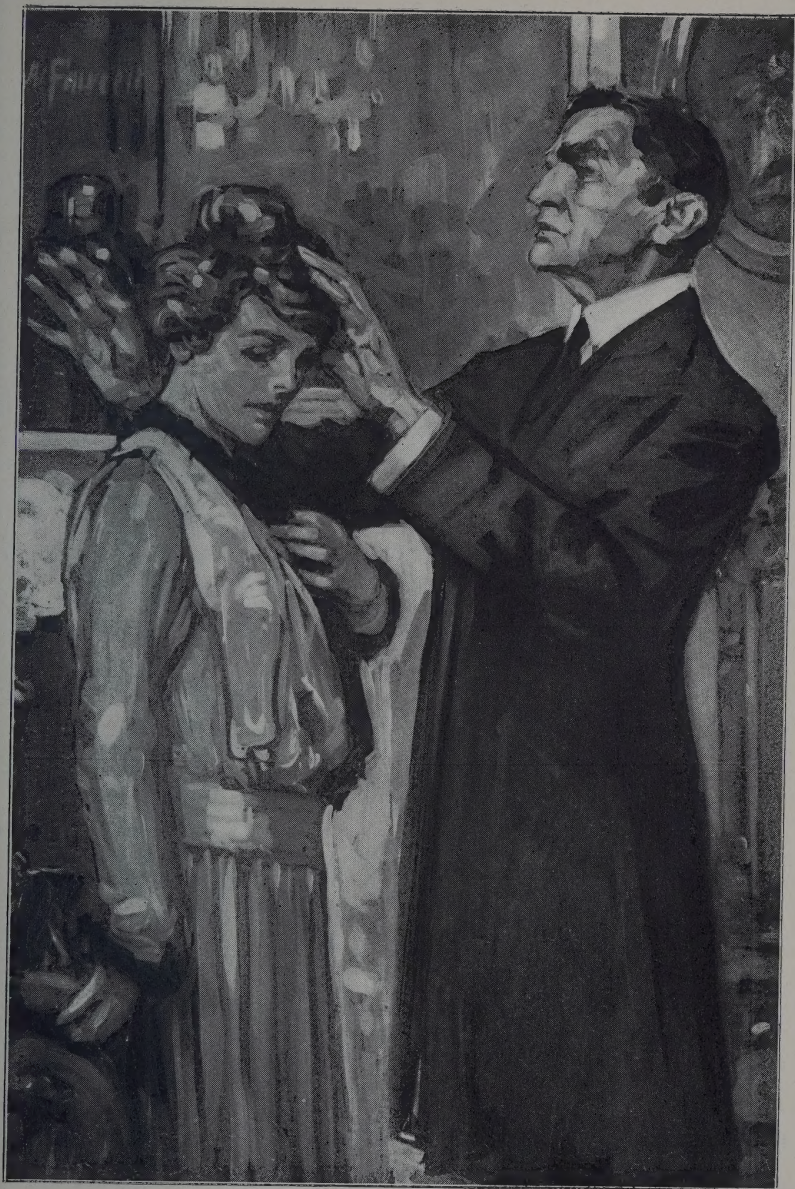
"Thank you," he said, quietly. "And thank you, also, Miss Ellerslie, for replying to my seemingly impertinent questions so frankly. My motives, as you know, were not those of idle curiosity. Do you think that I might venture to see Mrs. Appleton, your sister, now, for just a few moments?"

"I will see. I think so, Mr. Gaunt. You will remain here?"

"Yes. If you will have one of the servants let me know, I will go to her."

There was a soft rustle, a stirring of the air, and a gentle receding footfall. Gaunt sat where she had left him, a prey to sensations to which he had in all the past been a stranger. What was the peculiar, overmastering influence that this woman, out of all persons with whom he had come in contact, seemed unconsciously to exercise over him? Her presence, her physical and mental nearness, seemed to produce an intoxication, an exhilaration, an inward reaching out toward her, to which he could give no name. Could it be that he, the keen, calculating dissector of human motives and emotions, the automaton, from whose sightless eyes the world of romance must be forever hidden, was falling in love with a woman's voice, with the indications, manifest to his wonderfully acute intuition, of a pure and lovely nature?

He pulled himself up short in his line of thought with a strong effort of will. He was a detective, an officer of the law, engaged in the perpetual battle against crime. A dead man, who—no matter what sins had blackened his private life, no matter what evilness had sullied his nature—had been foully done to his death, and lay separated from him by only a wall or two, mutely begging for the only justice left that could be meted out to him in this world, demanding vengeance on his slayer! And he, Damon Gaunt, who had answered that silent call, who had accepted that sacred trust, was idly allowing himself to drift into dangerous



He placed his hand for an instant upon her soft hair, then withdrew it instantly.

byways, lured by the unconscious charm of an innocent siren! Every moment wasted in idle thought was a treachery to the cold clay lying near, the thing that had borne at least the semblance of manhood, the father of a little unborn child.

And there was work ahead for him to do—work that would require the full play of all his trained faculties, that would tax his every resource to the uttermost. Which of the many significant strands he held in his hand would lead to the truth? Which of the telltale evidences he possessed of the strange and varied way in which the secret hours of the night had been passed in the den, would point to the unknown hand that had pressed the trigger?

Soft, light footsteps warned him of Barbara Ellerslie's return, and in a moment her quiet tones thrilled through the silence of the room.

"If you will come now, Mr. Gaunt, please. My sister is eager to talk with you."

He rose and followed her in silence until she turned to guide his steps, and side by side they went up the great staircase together.

At the door of young Mrs. Appleton's room, she halted, and, turning to him, whispered tremulously:

"Remember your promise, Mr. Gaunt. Be very gentle with her. She has suffered so much, and I fear she is going to be very ill. Please, do not take too seriously any random remarks she may

make. She seems a little light-headed to me. Please, please, spare her all you can!"

He bowed his head in silent reassurance, and she turned the doorknob softly.

"Natalie, dear," she said, and he marveled anew at the tender mother-note that deepened in her tones, "here is Mr. Gaunt. He must see you alone for just a minute, dear. He will not distress you; he is here as a friend, to help us in our trouble. . . . Sit here, please.

She guided him to a soft, billowy, absurdly low chair, and he heard the quiet closing of a door behind her.

A little, dry, burning hand, like a bird's claw, grasped his convulsively, and the shrill, high, childlike voice of the morning cried out in anguished tones:

"Oh, Mr. Gaunt, who did it? Who killed my husband?"

For reply he raised his head suddenly, and asked sternly:

"Who else is in this room?"

"Why, no one—" began Natalie Appleton; but a trembling, aged voice interrupted her.

"Hit's me, suh. Ah jes' couldn' bear ter go 'way an' leave mah chil' 'lone wif yo'. She's reel po'ly, an' she needs 'er ol' mammy. 'Sides Ah wanter know what yo' gwine do ter 'er!"

"Why, Mammy Lu!" the girl—for she was little more—cried out in distress. "I told you to go out

—I told you! I want to talk to Mr. Gaunt alone. Why didn't Miss Barbara see that you obeyed me?"

"Mis' Ba'b'ra done tole me ter go; but I was behine de do' w'en she done open hit," the old woman returned, rebelliously. "Ain' gwine to have mah chil' flustrated no mo' dis day!"

"Well, you are going out immediately! Do you hear me, Mammy Lu?"

Natalie sat up on her pillows, and waited until, with much grumbling and dubious shaking of her head, the old negress had taken her departure.

"There, she's gone!" Natalie sank back with an exhausted air upon her couch. "I didn't intend to deceive you, really, Mr. Gaunt. I didn't know she was there. She brought us both up, Barbara and me, and she takes liberties, sometimes."

"That is all right, I quite understand," he returned, soothingly. "Let me arrange your pillows for you. There!"

He deftly smoothed the pillows about the little face, and contrived in so doing to get a strand of her hair between his fingers. He paused for an imperceptible instant of time, and then, patting a cushion with his left hand, he deliberately took a lock of her shining hair between the fingers of his right, and felt it. It was soft and fine and silky—the identical texture of the slender strand which had wound around his fingers a few hours before, the strand he had taken from the pendant

of the low-hanging brass lamp in the room of death.

She smiled up at him, as he seated himself again, in acknowledgment of his kindness, not dreamed that he had discovered that for which he had searched all day, and discovered it where he would least have desired to come upon it.

"Mrs. Appleton, I don't know who killed your husband," he replied to her question, at last. "I am here to find out, if I can, and I want you to help me."

"Me? Why, what can I do, Mr. Gaunt? How should I know what happened? I was asleep—think of it! Asleep, through it all!"

"Just answer a few questions as nearly as you can remember, Mrs. Appleton; try to think clearly. I want to know just what occurred after dinner last evening."

"Nothing. Everything was quite as usual—I mean, as usual when just the—the Carharts dine with us."

"And that is often?"

"Yes, very—that is, since Garret's mother and brother have been staying with us. She and the Judge played double-dummy bridge; Barbara went to Clara Shirley's wedding; Yates went out somewhere, too—I don't know where. I didn't feel very well, and went up to bed early."

"You were ill?"

"N-no. Just not very well."

"Were you unhappy, depressed? You need not be afraid to answer me frankly. I have talked with Mrs. Appleton, and your brother-in-law and sister. I know the situation between you and your husband. You went up-stairs to be by yourself?"

There was a pause, and then suddenly she doubled her little fists, and beat upon the soft-padded arms of her *chaise-longue*.

"Yes!" she burst out in a muffled voice, as if from between clenched teeth. "Yes! I couldn't stand it any longer! Her presence in my house, the looks that passed between her and my husband, the glances they cast at me! They showed me so plainly, they showed that they were trying to make me feel that I was an interloper, that I stood between them and happiness. Oh! I am not jealous, Mr. Gaunt; all that has passed long ago. But I am proud. This was my home, and I was being thrust aside, made to feel of no account, a stumbling-block, whom they were forced to tolerate. It was horrible!"

"But you are sure, Mrs. Appleton? Perhaps your—the state of your health makes you fanciful. Perhaps your husband was only showing ordinary courtesy to the daughter of an old friend."

With a convulsive intake of her breath, she opened her lips to speak; but no words came. After a moment of silence, she said, in an oddly constrained, repressed tone:

"Yes, I am sure—now!"

"Why now?" he asked, quickly.

"Because—oh, anyway, I—I ought to know, Mr. Gaunt." She spoke with child-like querulousness, then went on quickly: "At any rate, I couldn't bear to stay any longer watching her sitting there in my drawing-room, talking and looking as if she wished me out of the way. I thought that, if she wanted to talk to my husband alone, I would give her an opportunity; so I excused myself, and came up to bed. I disrobed, and tried to read; but the words all ran together in a jumble, and I couldn't fix my mind on anything. I thought of telephoning the doctor for a sleeping-powder—he had told me when I felt very nervous and upset to let him know. But then I remembered the—the people down-stairs, and that they would make inquiries, and Garret would say I—I had done it for effect. So, I decided to wait until Barbara came home."

She paused, and Gaunt took her little hot hand in his for an instant, in silent encouragement.

"And did you?" he urged her, gently.

"Y-yes." The high, bell-like voice, with the little suggestion of her sister's in its drawling sweetness, faltered, and then went on hastily: "When she returned, Mammy Lu t-told her I was nervous, and she came in, and we talked for a little while, and she quieted me—she always can—and I f-fell asleep."

Why did she hesitate, and stumble so over her simple recital?

"You did not wait for your husband to come up-stairs?"

"Oh, no!" the matter-of-fact tone was infinitely pathetic in its unconsciousness. "Garret never troubled to come in and say 'good night' to me—lately. He usually sits down in the—the den—" her trembling voice sank to a whisper; she had not yet realized the truth fully; she had not yet learned to speak of her husband in the past tense—"until long after everyone else in the house is asleep. He stays there, drinking by himself until he is in a stupor."

"I understand. Well, Mrs. Appleton, what is the next thing you remember?" His voice was still gentle, but it held a compelling, insistent underlying note to which she involuntarily responded.

"I woke up with terrible screams ringing in my ears, and I heard quick footsteps, as of someone running along the hall and down the stairs. I threw on something, and ran down, too. I heard a commotion in the den, and rushed to it. Everyone seemed to be there, the servants and all—all but Mammy Lu. I found out later that she was hiding up-stairs, frightened half to death. And Yates—I didn't notice him anywhere. And then—I saw Garret! He was sitting in his big chair by the table, staring straight at me with awful,

bulging eyes, and there was a great red blotch on his shirt-front. The—the next thing I knew, I was in Barbara's arms, hiding my face on her shoulder to keep from seeing Garret. I don't remember what happened after that, except begging some strange men—police officers, I think they were—to let me leave that dreadful room, and come up here."

"Mrs. Appleton," Gaunt's voice was very grave, "at what time were you in the den yesterday?"

"In the—d-den?" she stammered; and the detective could hear the silken coverlet shiver with her involuntary start. "I—I haven't been in the den. I can't remember when I was there last—days ago, any way. Why d-did you ask me that?"

"Think, Mrs. Appleton. Try to remember," he urged, his gravity deepening, as he ignored her question. "You were in the den, you know! Think!"

"But I wasn't! I wasn't! What do you mean? What are you trying to insinuate!" her voice rose shrilly, in hysterical trepidation.

"Don't you remember?" he persisted, a note of sternness creeping into his tones. "You caught your hair on that brass hanging lamp."

While she watched him, in terrified fascination, he drew slowly from his vest-pocket the telltale strand of hair, and, gripping one end firmly between his fingers, he held it out to her.

"See! This is your hair, isn't it? It matches yours. I found it caught on one of the swinging pendants of the lamp."

She snatched at it, in a frenzy of terror.

"It's not mine!" she screamed. "I thought you were blind! How can you tell?"

"Think, Mrs. Appleton," he repeated, sternly. "When were you in the den? When did you catch your hair on the lamp?"

There was silence, while she draw a deep, quivering breath, like a hurt animal. At last, she gave a little shuddering, hysterical laugh, which ended in a strangling gasp.

"Why—why, of course," she breathed with a catch in her trembling voice. "How—how stupid of me! I was in the den the day before yesterday, yesterday morning! I went to—to—s-see if the maid had dusted properly. I—I remember catching my hair on that s-silly old lamp. Garret *would* have it hung so low!"

"Ah! I thought you would remember." Gaunt quietly replaced the strand of hair in his pocket; and she saw that he knew her suddenly awakened remembrance for the shallow lie that it was, and shuddered.

To her infinite relief, he rose, and took her trembling little hand, which had turned suddenly icy-cold, in his.

"Well, Mrs. Appleton, I won't worry you with questions any longer. You must try to get some

rest now. I shall do my best to find the person who is responsible for this morning's tragedy, be sure of that. I will drop in on you again when you are able to see me."

But young Mrs. Appleton did not seem to have heard. Her effort at self-control had been too much, and she appeared on the verge of collapse.

"Barbara!" she moaned. "Barbara! Barbara!"

"Miss Ellerslie!" he called. There was no need for a second summons. He heard an inner door open, and a swift rush of her light feet, and in an instant she had gathered the girl in her arms. Natalie Appleton clung to her, and broke into wild weeping.

"I'm afraid our little talk has been too much for your sister," Gaunt explained, smoothly. "I will leave her with you."

She paid no attention to him, and he made his way quietly from the room, closing the door gently behind him. But, as he felt his way along the hall toward the stairs, he heard young Mrs. Appleton's voice raised in a strangling scream:

"Oh, Barbara! He knows! He knows!"

CHAPTER V

“CAIN!”

GAUNT encountered Katie, the housemaid, in the hall, and she guided him back to the library.

“Oh, sir,” she asked, at the door, “have you found out anything? Does the Inspector gentleman know what—what happened to Mr. Appleton?”

“Not yet,” he returned. “You will all know as soon as the family does.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” she stammered.

“Will you send the butler—Dakers—to me, please?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dakers was tardy in coming, and in the meantime Gaunt turned over in his mind the result of his last interview. So young Mrs. Appleton, too, had been in that fatal room during the previous night! That telltale strand of hair had given her away, and her agitation, her terror, her palpable falsehood, had betrayed her no less than the last despairing cry he had overheard. It was incredible that she had fired the shot which killed her husband. Yet she was maddened by his abuse of her, and his open attention to another woman

under her roof, and women in her condition were sometimes rendered temporarily abnormal mentally. Would that account for the pried-open window, the efforts to make the crime seem the result of an ordinary burglary? Could that have been the work of the devoted sister? She had the strength of mind to conceive and carry it out. She was resolute, possessed of admirable self-control. Then, too, the obvious, sketchy way the ruse had been perpetrated hinted at feminine illogic. Yet it did not seem to be within the realm of possibility that young Mrs. Appleton could deliberately, or on insane impulse, have taken her husband's life.

Dakers finally made his appearance. He was bearing a huge silver tray covered with a napkin, and he placed it on a low table before Gaunt, with a flourish.

"A bit of lunch, sir," he remarked briskly. "Mrs. Appleton—Mrs. Finlay Appleton—sent it. She said you must be famished, sir. It's past three."

Gaunt suddenly became conscious that he was hungry, wolfishly hungry. He had had nothing that day save his early-morning coffee, and he ate heartily, with Dakers standing by.

The butler was a pompous, rotund, little man, with sharp, rat-like eyes in his smug face, and large, soft, white hands.

He stood regarding the detective with lofty contempt while the latter uncovered the dishes upon

the tray; but his expression changed somewhat when Gaunt, after passing his finger-tips lightly over the silver tops of the salt- and pepper-shakers, selected the one with the smallest perforations, and poured a bit of its contents into his hand. He felt it delicately with his finger, and then turned to the waiting servant.

"This is white pepper," he remarked, quietly. "I prefer the black. Will you bring me some, please?"

With prompt servility, not untinged with respectful awe, Dakers obeyed, and when Gaunt, satisfied, pushed away his cup and plate, and addressed him, he replied obsequiously.

"You are the butler? How old are you, Dakers?"

"Fifty-six, sir. I've been with the Appleton family for nine years. Before that I was with the Staceys and the Postleys—"

"That's all right, Dakers. I don't want your pedigree. I want to know what you can tell me about this affair."

"I, sir? Nothing, sir," the butler replied, with an air of injured innocence.

"What did you do last night, after you served dinner?"

"I attended to my usual duties, sir. Locked up the silver, and carried the decanter and ice and siphon up to the—the den," he stammered over the word as the others had done, "for Mr. Appleton to use later, just as I always do. Then

I went down to the servant's dining-room—that's in the front basement, sir—and stayed until the family had retired, and it was time to lock up the house. Then I went to bed."

"You heard nothing during the night?"

"Nothing, sir, until Katie's screams woke me. I thought first of burglars. I remembered the plate under my charge, and I hurried down."

"And then what?"

"When I saw the poor master, sir, I—I don't know what I did, I was that shocked. I went all to pieces, sir."

"Who was there before you?"

"I—I hardly know, sir. Katie the housemaid, and Marie, and the cook, I think, and Mr. Yates' man, James."

"Then the family came?"

"Yes, sir. James tried to buck me up, and, when I'd pulled myself together a bit, Mrs. Finlay Appleton sent me out to notify the police. That's all I know, sir."

"After you attended to your usual duties, did you serve anything to the family during the evening?"

"Yes, sir. A grenadine lemonade to the ladies—Mrs. Finlay Appleton and Miss Carhart—and Scotch highballs to Judge Carhart and Mr. Appleton."

"Nothing to Mrs. Garret Appleton?"

"No, sir. She had retired when I served them."

"Did you come up-stairs again before locking up?"

"Yes, sir. To open the door for Judge Carhart and Miss Carhart when they left. After that, I locked the house."

"You did not admit Miss Ellerslie?"

"No; she had her keys. She expected to be out until very late. It was Mr. Appleton's orders, sir. I never waited up for Mr. Yates."

"And then you went directly to bed?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do, Dakers, thank you. Ask Marie to come here, please."

"Very good, sir." Dakers picked up his tray, and departed.

Had the man really "something up his sleeve," as Inspector Hanrahan had suspected? He had seemed guilelessly prompt in his replies; but his servility was misleading, and the detective did not like his manner of licking his lips, like a cat. The man's manner suggested slyness; but Gaunt did not credit him with enough intelligence to conceal any important evidence, should he possess it.

Marie heralded her entrance with a quick tapping of pointed finger-nails upon the door, and exuded a slight odor of the delicate perfume, when she approached, that Gaunt had previously noticed in the presence of the elder Mrs. Appleton. Evidently, the maid had taken a secret dip into her mistress' scent bottle, in honor of this interview—a touch of coquetry inherent in those of her nationality. She was a sallow, angular, sharp-featured woman of

middle age, with bold, black eyes, and full, scarlet lips, and she flashed a respectful, ingratiating smile at him, with a gleam of her even, white teeth, forgetting for the moment that it was wasted.

"I am here, *m'sieu*. I am Marie."

"Will you tell me, Marie, what happened when you rushed to the den this morning, in response to the housemaid's cries?"

"Weeth plaisir, *m'sieu*. I was ze firs' to respon'. Katee was still shr-rieking, and the poor *M'sieu* Appleton—but zat you know. I scream once, me, also, an' zen I try to quiet Katee. Zen ze cook, she have come, and Dakairs and James, an' zen Mees Ellerslie. Aftair zat, arrive Madame Appleton and *la petite madame*, an', at ze last, *M'sieu* Yates."

"Marie, do you remember exactly what happened when Mrs. Finlay Appleton turned from her son's body, and saw her younger son standing in the doorway? Did you hear the words she said to him?"

"Yes, *m'sieu*. She pointed her hand at him, like zis—oh, I forget! Pardon, *m'sieu*!—and she say, 'Cain!' Joost zat one leetle word, 'Cain!'"

"Ah!" the detective permitted the involuntary ejaculation of satisfaction to escape him. Then he added: "And Mr. Yates Appleton—what did he reply?"

"He say, '*Mon Dieu*!'—no, in Engleesh—'My God! Not zat—not zat!' An' he seenk down

on his knees, zere een ze doorway, an' put hees hands to hees face, an' sob, joost like a leetle chil', an' ze tears tr-reeckle down between hees fingairs."

"Thank you, Marie. That is all I wanted to know. Er—you heard nothing during the night?"

"Nosing, *m'sieu*. Onlee—" The woman hesitated.

"Only what?" the detective asked, sharply.

"Mees Ellerslie, *m'sieu*. She have ze room directly ondairneath mine, an' she walk, walk, most of ze night; but nearly ze morning have arrive all ees quiet, an' I sleep. Zat ees all, I have hear. No report of a pistol."

"Very well, Marie. That will do. But, before you go, I should like to know if your mistress, Mrs. Appleton, permits you to take her perfume for your personal use."

"Her pairfume? I—I do not comprehend, *m'sieu*! I do not touch ze pairfume of madame."

"You have a touch of it upon you now. I should advise you to be more careful, if you wish to retain your place."

"Ah, *m'sieu*, eet was an accident—ze bottle teeped, an' I 'ave speel a few drops. Eet ees nosing. *M'sieu*, I pray, weel say no word of eet to *madame*!" The brazen flare in her voice was replaced by an anxious note.

"Very well, Mary; but be careful. Please, send Dakers to me again."

When the butler appeared, Gaunt sent him to ask Miss Ellerslie to come to him for a moment, and then sat quietly waiting, with a half-smile upon his lips. "Cain!" Mrs. Appleton had branded her youngest son. She believed him to be the midnight visitant, the assassin of his brother. She herself had given no credence to the clumsy evidences of burglary; although she had had no time or opportunity to examine them, and although she had so stoutly asserted her belief in them to the detective, later, and simulated amazement and incredulity when the truth of the fabrication was so soon made manifest. The intricacies of the case were multiplying with almost incredible rapidity; but soon an illuminating light must be thrown on this labyrinth of mystery, and a way to the truth be revealed.

The footsteps of Miss Ellerslie sounded in the hall, and she entered, closing the door behind her.

"Mr. Gaunt, you did not keep your promise to me," she said, with a world of reproach in her voice. "Had I known that you meant to torture my little sister as you did, I should never have permitted you to see her. I implored you not to tax her beyond her strength. I warned you that she was light-headed, that too much credence must not be placed upon what she might say."

"I am very sorry, Miss Ellerslie. I tried to be very gentle, and I was as considerate as the occa-

sion would permit. I merely attempted to recall a certain incident to Mrs. Appleton's mind—and succeeded."

"So that was why you wished to touch my hair! I could not imagine—" She broke off abruptly, then added: "If you had told me, Mr. Gaunt, if you had shown me the strand of hair you found entangled in the pendant of the lamp, I could have told you that my sister was in the den yesterday morning."

"You knew it, then?" The question was shot quickly at her.

"Certainly, since I suggested it," she replied composedly. "Garret had been complaining that his den was not properly dusted and put in order, and I did not want any further aspersions to be cast upon my sister's housekeeping ability or inclination by those members of the household who were hostile to her. . . . But you sent for me, Mr. Gaunt, I believe? I do not want to remain away from my sister any longer than is absolutely necessary. Her condition is quite alarming. She seems to be almost delirious, and I have sent a messenger for the doctor."

"I am sorry," Gaunt said once more. "I will not detain you long. You told me, when I talked with you before, if you remember, that this morning, at the time of the discovery of the crime, when Mrs. Finlay Appleton turned from the body of her elder son, and saw the younger standing in the door-

way, she spoke to him, and he broke down and wept. What did she say to him?"

"I don't know." Barbara Ellerslie's hesitation was apparent. "I did not hear distinctly, and my whole attention was given to my sister."

"You heard something, however indistinct. What did it sound like? A long sentence or short?"

"Oh, very short. Just a-a word, I think—a single word."

"Was that word 'Cain,' Miss Ellerslie?"

"Please don't ask me, Mr. Gaunt!" The distressed cry was wrung from her. "Remember, my brain was overwrought, distraught! If I fancied that was said, and repeated it, it would look like a deliberate accusation, without a shadow of proof and beyond the bounds of probability, and I—I will not seem to cast such an imputation on anyone. If that is what I imagined I heard, my ears may have misled me. Mrs. Appleton, for all her outward calm when you arrived, must have been as overwrought as I—and more, since it was her son who lay dead before her. One should not be judged by what one says or does in the madness of such a moment. There is little kindness on my heart toward her and hers, God knows; yet justice is justice!"

"I understand, Miss Ellerslie, and I am answered. Did Mr. Yates Appleton reply, as he broke down, 'My God! Not that! Not that!'"

"Really, I cannot tell you. It—it sounded some-

thing like that to me; but I cannot commit myself. I paid little or no attention. I cannot, will not, make any statement concerning it! And now, Mr. Gaunt may I return to my sister? She needs me. It is not safe to leave her now in Mammy Lu's care alone, even for a moment."

"Yes, Miss Ellerslie. I will not detain you any longer. Thank you for coming down again. I may perhaps call tomorrow, when I hope your sister will be better. Please, assure her that she need not be afraid of me." Then, as he felt her eyes fixed upon him in sudden, questioning suspicion, he added with a smile: "I am not quite an ogre!"

"I will tell her, Mr. Gaunt," her voice was reassured, but infinitely sad, as she said, in an afterthought, "when she is able to understand. She seems very, very ill. I am in fear for her safety, her reason. Let me know, of course, if there is anything further that I can do, can tell you. And if any further developments occur, I should like to know of them, for all our sakes. Good-by."

She left the room, and for a few moments the detective sat buried in thought. How loyally, how valiently, she had lied for the woman upstairs! And yet she might have been sticking to the letter of the truth; her sister might have gone to inspect the den the previous morning. But that she had visited it later, sometime, in fact,

during the hours of the night, and that Barbara Ellerslie knew of it, was patent. Young Mrs. Appleton's terror at his question, and the agonized cry he had overheard from outside her door, were damning proof.

He rose, and rang the bell.

"Ring for my car, please," he directed, giving the number when the butler appeared. "And tell Mrs. Finlay Appleton that I have finished here for today, and will let her know at once when I have any definite news for her, or require further information. Is Inspector Hanrahan here?"

"No, sir. He went an hour ago. He may be back at any moment, sir. Would you care to wait?" Dakers' respect had evidently increased. A detective who could afford to keep a private motor was foreign to his experience, and must be a person of some importance.

Gaunt encountered Inspector Hanrahan, who returned as he was on the point of departure.

"Anything new?" he asked.

"Got him," was the Inspector's succinct reply.

"Got him! Who?"

"Louis Lantelme," Inspector Hanrahan explained. "The valet Mr. Appleton kicked out a month ago—the fellow the housemaid, Katie, was stuck on. I'm afraid he's got a good alibi, though, for last night. He told a pretty straight story, and one that can be easily proved. Got anything yourself, Mr. Gaunt?"

"Not very much. There's something I want you to do for me, though. Find out for me the hour Mr. Yates Appleton left the Patriarchs' Club last night."

"What's that?" the Inspector asked, in eager surprise.

"Oh, not what you think it is!" smiled Gaunt. "I know where he was all the rest of the night. It's no question of an alibi. I just want to know the exact time he left the club, and I haven't time to look it up, myself. The door-man can tell you; and possibly some of the waiters, or card-room attendants, can corroborate him."

"All right, Mr. Gaunt; I'll attend to it."

"And you might drop around to my rooms to-night, if you find this out in the meantime, and can spare an hour. I may have a few pointers for you."

"I will."

Gaunt's chauffeur was waiting in the vestibule to pilot him unobtrusively to his machine; but once he was ensconced, and the engine cranked, they remained stationary.

"What's the matter, Saunders?" the detective asked, through the tube.

"'Nother car and an undertaker's wagon blockin' the way, sir."

An undertaker's wagon! The last act of the tragedy of the night was about to be enacted for Garret Appleton, and the curtain rang down upon

an unadmirable career. What a misspent life, a waste of golden opportunities, culminating in a hideous end! What Nemesis could have stamped that look of blank fear and horror upon the dying features? What had occurred in that dark hour, before the shot was fired which so relentlessly hurled him into eternity?

When Gaunt alighted at his own door, he said to the chauffeur:

"Saunders, I sha'n't require the car tonight; but I want you to do a bit of detective work for me—the sort of thing you've done before."

"Yes, sir!" Saunders replied, eagerly.

"Go to the Appleton's private garage. You can easily find it. It's just around the corner, I believe, from their house, from which you just brought me. Scrape acquaintance with Mr. Yates Appleton's chauffeur. If he isn't there, find out where he lives, or where he may be found, if he's idle tonight—and I fancy he will be. Take him out, if he'll go, and treat him, or give him any story you please, but try to get out of him his exact movements last night, and when he took Mr. Appleton from the club, where they went, and all that. Find out, also, if Mr. Yates Appleton by any chance injured his hand while out in the machine last night. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Guess it will be easy, sir. I'll try, anyway."

"Here's a ten-dollar bill for expenses. If it's

any more, let me know; but get the truth if you can, no matter what it costs."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Jenkins, Gaunt's man, fell upon him anxiously at the door.

"Glad you've come, sir!" he exclaimed. "Miss Barnes has been hoping you'd be back for three hours, or more. Three telegrams and two long-distance calls from Newport. Big jewel robbery at the Fahnestock place! Shall I pack?"

"No, Jenkins. Can't take it," Gaunt replied, laconically. "I'm on a case now, as you very well know."

"I, sir?" inquired Jenkins, with an air of innocence. "I remember a gentleman called this morning, and you went out with him; but how should I know you were on a case, sir?"

"Because you've got an evening paper in your hand at this moment. I can hear it rattle. And it's the latest edition—probably an extra—not the early-afternoon one we always take anyway; for I can smell fresh ink upon it. You read of the case, and my connection with it, in the afternoon paper, and sent out and got another, later one. You can't fool me, Jenkins."

As the detective turned toward the library, Jenkins murmured after the departing figure:

"No, I'm blest if I can! You can see more with-out eyes than most men can with 'em!

CHAPTER VI

THE CUFF LINK

“**M**ISS BARNES, look back over the newspaper files in the store-room, in the society news of, say, three, four, five, and six years ago, and read me whatever you find relating to the Appleton family, at East Sixty-eighth Street, will you?”

Gaunt was stretched out at ease in his own familiar, favorite chair, pipe in mouth, and Scraper, the bull-terrier, at his feet. He was thinking over the evidence gathered during the day's investigation, sifting the wheat from the chaff, and he found it no easy task. He had, in the course of his career, become interested in many baffling cases, but none that presented such complications, such a multiplicity of possible motives and possible culprits. Yates Appleton, at war with his brother over that which was to him the most vital thing in life, money; the wife, maddened by abuse and jealousy; the other girl, who had so plainly betrayed her love for him.

The detective made no mistake in his analysis of the situation that had existed between Doris Carhart and Garret Appleton. Here was no vulgar intrigue. That he had been as much in love

with her as she so obviously with him, and that the wife had stood between, was possible, even probable.

But the girl was of a type readily recognized by Gaunt, a type prevalent everywhere in America at least; particularly so in New York society: the flirt incarnate, the girl, who, in spirit half-wanton, half-puritan, plays with fire, yet holds herself rigidly aloof from the all-consuming flame. It might be that she had been fascinated by the malicious delight of a flirtation, with a married man, carried on under his helpless wife's eyes, careless of the suffering she caused, and had discovered that in the process her own heart had been singed, but no more. Perhaps she had hoped that a divorce might be arranged, and she step into Natalie's shoes; but the prospect of an heir had precluded that. Perhaps—who could tell, now?—he had tired of what was to him a purposeless game, and had told her, on that momentous evening, that they had come to the parting of their ways. In any event, might she not have returned stealthily for a final interview, previously arranged between them, and, in a moment of madness, slain him, determined that, since she could not possess him before the world, no other woman should? In that case, her horror and astonishment of the morning had been consummately simulated, and her nerve and courage supreme. He believed her capable of it; but it seemed scarcely

credible that she could be capable of the crime itself, and the practical difficulties in the way of her clandestine departure from her own house in the small hours of the morning, and a return unobserved to the Appleton mansion, seemed well-nigh insurmountable.

"Young woman to see you, sir." Gaunt had been so lost in thought that he had not heard the approach of Jenkins. "Says she comes from the Appleton house. She seems kind of [upset-like."

"Ask her to come up, please." The detective rose hastily, and pushed Scrapper gently into an inner room, closing the door upon him. A young girl! The method of Jenkin's announcement suggested one of the domestics. Could it be that, in interviewing only the principals in the affair, and the only two of the servants whose information he had thought would be of most immediate use to him, he had overlooked an important link in the chain?

Jenkins returned, ushering in a pretty, red-cheeked maid, whose blue eyes, although sullen and frightened, glowed with determination. Jenkins eyed her in bold admiration; but with a toss of her head she dismissed him from her interest, her gaze fixed upon the tall figure before her, the thin, ascetic face softened by a kindly smile, as if he could see her standing there, trembling, but resolute, in the doorway.

"Who is it, please?" he asked quietly, as she remained tongue-tied.

"'Tis me, sor, Katie Gerahty. I'm house-maid at the Appleton's—"

"Aye, yes. Come in, Katie. . . . Jenkins, that will do. Now, Katie, what is it you wished to see me about?"

"'Twas me that found the—the corpse, sor. I've been expectin' all day long that you'd ask for me; but you didn't, an', when I found you'd gone, I thought I'd better come after you."

"I understand. I hadn't time to interview all of you today, and I thought Inspector Hanrahan had talked to you."

"Sure, he had, sor, an' a fine bully he is, too. He'd get nothin' out of me, if I died for it, talkin' to me as if I'd killed the poor master meself! I found his body, sor—but I found something else beside, an' though I wouldn't give the Inspector the satisfaction of gettin' it from me, I'm an honest girl, an' I don't keep nothin' that don't belong to me."

"And what was it that you found, Katie? You did right to bring it to me." Gaunt with difficulty restrained his eagerness.

"This, sor." She approached, and placed in his outstretched hand a small, golden object. His fingers closed quickly over it, and he felt it all over with minute care.

It was a man's gold cuff-link, of the sort that are

sometimes given to ushers at weddings, save that the initials on one side, and the date on the other, instead of being cut in, were raised, and of a plain block design. The detective's delicate, sure fingertips spelled out for him the figures, 1911, and on the other side the letters, Y. A.

"And where did you find this, Katie?"

"In the den, sor, right by the door, when I first went in. Like enough it had rolled or been dropped there."

"How did you happen to notice it, with Mr. Appleton sitting there dead before you?"

"Well, you see, sor, it was kinder dark in the den when I opened the door—only the one window open and the shade up and the side curtains half-hiding that. I wasn't what you might call waked up for the day, either, and, when I seen Mr. Appleton sittin' there in his chair, I thought he was sleeping. 'Twouldn't be the first time that I'd come down, savin' your presence, and found him stupid drunk there from the night before. Then I seen something shinin' at my feet, an' I picked it up, and afterward went clost to Mr. Appleton to wake him if I could—and there was that bloody splash on his shirt-front, and the awful dead face of him starin' up at me. I screeched then, sor. In th' excitement after, I forgot all about the cuff-button that I dropped in me apron-pocket, until that Inspector began asking me ugly questions in the way of him, and sure I just wouldn't let on

about it. I was afraid after to give it to one of the family; so I thought I'd better bring it to you."

"Very well, Katie. I will see that it reaches the owner." Then, as the girl seemed to hesitate, he asked: "Is there anything more you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes, sor. 'Tis about that French thing—that maid, Marie. Before you come this mornin', she slipped away from the crowd of us around the door of the den, and I—well, I followed her. She had a funny look on her face, and—well, to tell you the truth, sor, she's no friend of mine. We had a difference about a young man—but that's neither here nor there. When I come up with her, she was usin' the telephone in the back hall. I heard her say, 'It is true, *ma'm'selle*, he is dead—murdered! I thought that you would wish to know privately, so as to be prepared for the shock when the news reaches your house.' Then she hanged up the receiver with a bang."

"To whom do you think she was speaking, Katie? Have you any idea?" The detective paused and then, as the girl made no answer, he added: "To Miss Doris Carhart, by any chance?"

"How did you know, sor?" The girl's surprised exclamation was involuntary; but she went on hastily: "Of course, I have no proof, but—well, you know how servants sometimes sees more than they're supposed to. I have been thinkin' for a long time that there was some carryings-on between

Mr. Appleton and the Judge's daughter, and that this Marie was kinder helping them out. 'Twas just a suspicion of mine, an' I'm not paid to carry no tales."

"I understand, Katie. I won't quote you. You are a very bright girl, and you have helped me a lot. If you see anything going on that you think I ought to know, come to me, here. I'll make it worth your while. . . . By the way, Katie, why don't you wear glasses? You're very near-sighted, and you should have it corrected. You don't want to become like me, you know," he added, with a smile.

"My eyes do be troublin' me a lot, sir. I don't see how you know about that!" Her round eyes grew wider as she spoke.

"Your ankles are weak, too. You should wear stouter shoes," he commented. "You stumble a little, and you are a little uncertain in your walk, also, although you are not heavy-footed. You take very short steps, and plant your heel down first. That shows you are near-sighted, and afraid to strike out, because of turning your ankle and falling."

"Well, sor, it beats all how you knew; but it's true!" Katie backed away toward the door as she spoke, and felt desperately behind her for the knob. She desired above all things to get away from this uncanny presence. "I—I'll come again, sor, if I hear anything more!" And she departed.

After the girl had gone, Gaunt sat for some moments turning the cuff-button over and over in his hands. Out of the seemingly hopeless array of conflicting evidence, some facts began to dovetail magically, and to suggest an almost impossible hypothesis, from which the detective, accustomed as he was to studies of the darker side of human nature, shrank.

The reappearance of Miss Barnes put an end to his reflections for the time being.

"I have found several references, Mr. Gaunt," she said, "in the society news of five and six years ago to the Appleton family; but they are merely announcements of receptions, dinners, dances, and so forth, although you may wish me to read you the lists of the guests. But four years ago—four years last April, to be exact—there is the announcement of the engagement between Mr. Garret Appleton and Miss Doris Carhart, daughter of Judge Anthony Carhart, of the Supreme Court. Three months later, in July of the same year, there is an announcement of the breaking of that engagement."

"That was something I had not looked for," Gaunt murmured to himself. Then aloud: "Go on, please, Miss Barnes."

"I thought you might like me to look up, also, while I was among these old files, any articles I might find referring to the Carharts."

The detective smiled in grateful appreciation.

"I find that in October of the previous year—five years ago—Miss Carhart made her *début*, and in December of that year she was bridesmaid at the Lancaster-Dubois wedding. All other references are practically the same as those relating to the Appleton family—invitations to social affairs at their house, or appearances at the opera. In November, four months after the breaking of the engagement with Miss Carhart, comes the announcement of Mr. Appleton's engagement to Miss Natalie Ellerslie, of Louisville, Kentucky, and, in the following March, that of their marriage. All the later references to them which I have been able to discover are merely those of social affairs, and among the guests listed Miss Carhart's name and Judge Carhart's appear almost invariably."

"Thank you very much, Miss Barnes, and now—what time is it please?"

As if in answer, six silvery notes sounded from the bronze clock on the mantel, and Gaunt, taking up the telephone receiver, called up the Bryant Chambers, and asked for Mr. Maurice Livingston.

"This is Mr. Livingston. Who is it, please?" came in a hearty, good-natured voice over the wire.

"Mr. Gaunt is speaking—Mr. Damon Gaunt. You have, no doubt, Mr. Livingston, heard of the sudden death of Mr. Garret Appleton. I have been retained by the family to investigate matters for them. In the course of my work, I have inter-

viewed Mr. Yates Appleton, and, as a mere matter of form, I should like to see you, if you can spare me a few moments, to corroborate some of his statements."

"If you can come at once, Mr. Gaunt, I shall be glad to give you any assistance in my power. I have a dinner engagement at seven o'clock."

"I can be with you in ten minutes, Mr. Livingston."

"Very good."

The receiver clicked, and Gaunt summoned Jenkins for his hat and coat, and to call a taxicab. Jenkins, too, accompanied him to Bryant Chambers, and, under the guidance of the hall-boy, conducted him to the door of Mr. Livingston's apartment, after which he returned to the cab, to wait.

The detective was admitted by a haughty English valet, and conducted to the living-room. After a few moments' delay, he heard a brisk, buoyant step, and the voice that had replied to him over the telephone sounded in his ears."

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Gaunt; but I was dressing. Terrible thing that about poor Garret. Yates must be completely knocked out."

Gaunt turned in the direction of the voice, and his foot inadvertently touched the projecting claw-foot of the table.

"I don't see why Parker didn't turn the rest of

the lights on," his host exclaimed irritably, as he pressed the button in the wall.

"The lights make no difference—to me, Mr. Livingston. I am blind."

"You—oh, I see! I beg your pardon. Why, I have heard of you, of course. You were the man who worked out those famous Delamater murders. By Jove! Sit down, Mr. Gaunt, and tell me what I can do for you. Will you have a cigar? These are of Porto Rican tobacco, made for me."

"Thank you. But, Mr. Livingston, your cigar-maker must have been mistaken in his blend. These are the shape and size of Porto Ricos, but the tobacco is Havana."

"Is it? By Jove! I ordered Porto Ricos."

"Can't you tell the difference?" asked the detective, with a smile.

"Not unless they are lighted, and not always then. I thought I was something of a connoisseur of tobacco; but you have me beaten. They're identical in color."

"Some growths are; but the odor is unmistakable, if your nose is trained to distinguish the difference. Then, too, feel the shape of the leaf, even as tightly rolled as these are. They are undoubtedly Havana. But I did not come to take up your time by an idle discussion concerning tobacco. I came for some information which only you can give me."

"You wanted to ask me something about Yates Appleton, didn't you?"

"Yes, I wanted to know what time he got to your rooms, last night. About one o'clock?"

"Just about—I could not say exactly. I had been to the theater and supper, and was just thinking of turning in when he appeared."

"Nice state he must have been in, too," the detective remarked, with studied carelessness; "with one cuff flying open."

"Yes!" laughed Mr. Livingston, with the hearty stomach laugh of a fat man. "I had to lend him a pair of cuff-buttons. He seemed awfully worked up and excited; but then he was a bit—well, you know."

"Yes," Gaunt smiled, "I know. . . . You have known Mr. Yates Appleton long, Mr. Livingston?"

"Known him and his brother all my life," the other returned. "This shock may pull Yates up and steady him. It's a frightful affair. Garret Appleton was shot by a burglar during the night, wasn't he?"

"That is the case as it stands now," replied the detective. "You cannot give me any more definite information as to the time Mr. Yates Appleton called on you last night, can you?"

"Sorry, I can't. My man had gone to bed, and I was—well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Gaunt, I was a little foggy myself."

Gaunt laughed.

"All right, Mr. Livingston; I quite understand. I won't detain you any longer. Thank you for allowing me to intrude upon you in this way."

"Oh, it was no intrusion at all, I assure you. I'll be only too glad to help in any way I can. Call on me any time you like."

On the way back to his rooms, in the taxi, Gaunt mused over the information he had just received. Yates Appleton's friend had, indeed, corroborated the statement, although in so vague a fashion, as to the time of the call upon him; but, on the other hand, he had all unwittingly corroborated the damning evidence of the little link of gold—the link in the disconnected chain of events which proved that some time during the evening Yates had returned to his home, had been in the room where a few hours later his brother was found done to death. If the testimony of the attendants at the club should show that Yates Appleton really left there at about midnight, as he had said, it would leave a rather close margin of time for him to have gone home, held an interview of whatever nature with his brother, and arrived at the rooms of Maurice Livingston by one. A great deal depended now upon Saunders' success in obtaining information from the Appleton chauffeur as to where he had driven the car from the time of leaving the club to the arrival at Bryant Chambers.

His simple dinner over, the detective sat in his library, waiting the promised visit of Inspector Hanrahan with ill-concealed impatience. One problem of the morning kept recurring to his mind: Mrs. Finlay Appleton must have thought her younger son guilty of the murder, else she would not have turned from the body of Garret with the cry of, "Cain!" upon her lips. Yet, why, in that case, had she proceeded immediately to obtain the services of a detective of wide repute, to investigate the murder and discover the culprit?

But stay! Had he been retained to discover the truth, or, as Yates had informed him, to prevent as much of the police interference as possible? Would Mrs. Finlay Appleton or her son later approach him in an attempt to influence him by a bribe, or otherwise to cloak the true facts of the case in their interest?

The inspector arrived about nine.

"Mr. Yates Appleton left the club about ten minutes of twelve, Mr. Gaunt. The carriage-starter says so, and the coat-room boy confirms him, because Mr. Appleton particularly asked him the time. . . . Got anything new, sir? There is nothing in that Louis Lantelme theory. The man's alibi proved to be complete."

"Did you get any more out of Dakers, the butler?" the detective asked, after a pause.

"No, sir."

Something in the detective's face made the burly Inspector lean forward suddenly, his hands on his knees.

"What do you mean, sir? What do you think?"

"Watch him!"

CHAPTER VII

THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

SAUNDERS, the chauffeur, presented himself bright and early the following morning; but his ruffled manner was expressive of defeat.

"Sorry, sir," he commenced. "I found your man all right—Mr. Appleton's chauffeur. I spent your ten and another five—no man who drinks like that has any right to run a car. But I couldn't get a thing out of him of much account, except that nothing happened to Mr. Appleton's hand that he knew anything about. He left the club a little before twelve, drove round town for awhile, and then to Bryant Chambers. There they picked up a friend of Mr. Appleton's, and went on around town for a couple of hours, stopping at two or three all-night cafés. At about three o'clock in the morning, the chauffeur took both the young gentlemen home. That's all I could find out, sir; but—"

"But, what Saunders?"

"Well, sir, it looked to me like the fellow wasn't telling me the truth, altogether. He hemmed and hawed, and had kind of a sly way with him when he was talking, though he talked quick enough.

I had a kind of an idea that he was onto me—that he knew I was trying to get something out of him.”

“Very well, Saunders. You have done the best you could.

“Here is the extra money you have spent, and another five for yourself. Got the car waiting outside?”

“Yes, sir—thank you, sir.”

“Then I think I will have you take me up to the Appleton house. There is something I overlooked yesterday—”

But Gaunt got no further. As he turned to press the button in the wall to summon Jenkins, that indefatigable person appeared in the door, and his apologetic cough held a slightly perturbed note.

“Excuse me, Mr. Gaunt. There’s a man downstairs who wants to see you. He’s very—persistent, sir. Says his name’s Dakers.”

“Very well, Jenkins. Hold him below for two or three minutes, until Saunders gets out. . . . Saunders,” he turned to where the chauffeur stood fingering his cap, beside the table, “go down and wait in the car. I sha’n’t be long. I’ve changed my mind about going to the Appleton house; but I shall want you to take me somewhere else, immediately.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll be cranked up, waiting.”

Dakers! The suave, servile butler of the Appletons! The man whom Inspector Hanrahan felt

sure had "something up his sleeve"! Had he discovered some facts which he felt to be of importance, in the hours that had elapsed since the detective had interviewed him the previous day; or had he, for some purpose of his own, withheld certain knowledge in his possession, until he felt it to be no longer politic, or even safe, to do so? □

In a few moments, Jenkins' step could be heard approaching, accompanied by the stealthy, cat-like tread that Gaunt remembered from the day before, and Dakers stood before him.

The detective did not speak until his man had retired, and then he took a bold lead:

"Well, Dakers," he said, quietly, "you've decided to make a clean breast of it, have you? Sit down, and be sure this time that you tell me the truth."

"It was the truth that I told you yesterday, sir, I assure you, sir, only—only, it wasn't all the truth. There was something about the night before, sir, that I—I didn't mention."

"I thought not. Well, go on—out with it!"

"It was all just as I told you, sir. I attended to my usual duties, putting away the silver after dinner, serving refreshments to the family during the evening, placing the decanter and glasses in the den, opening the door for Judge Carhart and Miss Carhart when they left, and then locking up the house. I went to bed. But I couldn't sleep, and I got up after a bit, and came down—

stairs again to get a—a little something for myself, sir.”

“A drink—whisky?”

“A—a little brandy, sir. I was very much surprised when I came near the den, to hear voices—loud, angry voices. I thought at first Mr. Garret was talking to himself. He does, sometimes, when he’s alone, in the night like that, sir. But then I heard two voices, and I—I recognized the second one.”

The man paused, his voice trembling huskily.

“Who was it?” the detective asked, sternly.

“Mr.—Mr. Yates, sir.”

“What was he saying?”

“I couldn’t repeat the exact words, sir; but they were having an argument—a quarrel. Mr. Yates wanted some money from his brother, quite a lot of money. He kept repeating that he had to have it at once. I think he called it ‘a debt of honor,’ or something like that. He mentioned a card game at the club, I think—but I wasn’t what you might call listening, sir. I wouldn’t so far forget myself. The door of the den was open, and I was just outside in the hall, waiting for a chance to slip past and out to the butler’s pantry. Mr. Garret had begun his night’s drinking, and he was in an extra ugly mood, sir, sneering at Mr. Yates, and taunting him, and working him up, until at last—”

“Go on.”

“There was a snarl from Mr. Yates, and then

the—the sound of a blow. I didn't see it, of course, sir; but it must have been Mr. Yates who struck, because there was a regular bellow of rage from Mr. Garret, and then he ordered his brother out of the house."

"Did he go at once?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't wait to see; I didn't want to hear any more. I turned and went back to my room as quick as I could, for fear they'd come out and find me."

"Did you hear anything after that, anything that sounded like a shot, for instance?"

"No, sir, nothing. My room is at the very top of the house, and I shut my door tight, and went back to bed. And that's all I know. That was everything I heard until Katie screamed, in the early morning, and I rushed down to find Mr. Garret dead in his chair."

"At what time did you leave your bed, Dakers, and go down-stairs for the brandy?"

"At a little after twelve, sir."

"And how long did you remain standing outside the door of the den? How long before the blow was struck, and Mr. Yates Appleton was ordered from the house?"

"I couldn't rightly say, sir. Not more than ten or fifteen minutes, at the longest; for, when I got back to my room, it was half-past twelve by my clock."

"Are you sure? What made you look to see?"

The questions came like a rapid-fire shot; but the butler was ready for them.

"I knew Miss Ellerslie would be home soon from the wedding-reception, and I wondered if she would hear them quarreling, sir, or if Mr. Yates would go to his rooms, or take himself out of the house again before she came."

"H'm! Why did you come to me today and tell me this? Why didn't you tell me yesterday?"

The butler hesitated a fraction of a second too long.

"Well, sir, I—I've been with the family too long. It didn't seem fair to give any of them away like that—although I don't owe Mr. Yates Appleton anything!" The note of resentment that crept into his voice at the last words was unmistakable, and illuminating. "He's never done me a good turn in his life. But I was afraid, if the police, or you, sir, found out that he'd come back and quarreled with his brother in the night, they might think he'd—he'd killed him, sir, especially as he'd struck him."

"And what made you change your mind, Dakers?"

"Well, after I'd thought it all over, it didn't seem right to keep anything back—like interfering in the course of justice, sir."

"I understand what you mean, Dakers. But why didn't you go to Mrs. Appleton—the elder Mrs. Appleton?"

"What, sir? I don't quite see, sir!" The butler's suave tones were blended with a note of amazement and alarm.

Gaunt smiled quietly to himself.

"When Mr. Yates Appleton refused to pay you for your silence, why didn't you go to his mother? You won't get anything out of it by coming to me, you know, and Mrs. Appleton would have paid you well."

The butler cringed suddenly.

"I don't know how you knew it, sir; but it's true. After all, it wasn't anything to be ashamed of, sir. I'm a poor man, and what I knew was worth money. But Mr. Yates wouldn't bargain with me. Just flew in a rage, and used dreadful language, and ordered me out when I called to see him last evening. I did try to see Mrs. Appleton; but she sent down word that she was indisposed, and wouldn't receive anyone. I don't think the little note I sent up to her at the Blenheim Hotel last evening was ever delivered to her, though, or she would have seen me right enough. I couldn't get admitted to her this morning either, and I knew it was no good trying Mr. Yates again. I was afraid, too, that you, or the Inspector, might find out any minute what I knew, and I thought I'd better come and tell you. I've got to think of my character, sir."

"Well, you've thought of it rather late, Dakers. Do you realize that, if anything comes of this,

you may be subpoenaed to appear in court and testify, and, when it comes out that you've deliberately kept this evidence back in order to try to get money from the family for your silence, you may be arrested for attempted blackmail?"

"Blackmail!" the man fairly shrieked. "Oh, sir, no—not that! My character would be ruined, sir! I shouldn't be able to get another place, and I've worked faithfully, all my life, for the very best people. I didn't intend it as blackmail, sir—indeed, indeed, I didn't! It was only a—a favor, like, to the family, and they could well afford to pay for it. I never thought of blackmailing anybody—never!"

"Well, considering that you came to me, and told me, of your own free will, Dakers, I'll see what I can do for you. But mind you keep this quiet, without a word to anyone, and hold yourself in readiness to testify whenever I want you."

"Yes, sir, of course; anything you say, sir. I'm sure I'm perfectly willing to do whatever you say!" At his dismissal, the frightened little man scurried out, as if only too glad to escape from the dreaded presence of the detective.

Gaunt wasted no time, but, summoning Jenkins for his hat and coat, descended to the car.

"The Calthorp, Saunders, and look sharp."

The air was crisp and searchingly cold, in the first keen frost of early autumn, and the swift rush of sharp wind seemed to clear Gaunt's thoughts, and

send his blood racing through his veins. The task before him was a difficult one. Although it seemed that the case, on the face of it, was all but cleared up, and the mystery of Garret Appleton's death solved, there were several points still lost in obscurity, points of glaring significance. It was evident that the butler had told all he knew. Gaunt had so thoroughly frightened him by the threat of punishment for attempted blackmail that he would eagerly have disclosed anything further of which he might have been cognizant, to ingratiate himself with the detective, and thus possibly save his own skin. It seemed inconceivable that he, lying awake and probably on the *qui vive* for any further sounds of strife and discension from below, in spite of the fact that his room was at the top of the house and his door closed, would not have heard the revolver shot, had Garret Appleton's life been ended during the ensuing moments of his quarrel with his brother. More than that, Yates knew that Barbara Ellerslie might return at any moment, and walk in upon the scene of the tragedy, unless in the heat of his rage and passion this had passed quite from his mind.

But, if he had killed his brother, would he have walked out of the house, leaving the traces of his crime for any casual discovery, only to return hours later, and attempt, as well as he could, to change the scene to represent the murder as the outcome of a burglary? It seemed unthinkable,

as, by the testimony of his own friend, he had left in a far more intoxicated condition than when he had come to him, at approximately one o'clock, directly after the quarrel. And if he had been in a sufficiently clear-headed condition to have attempted to cover the traces of his crime, would he not have remembered the damning bit of evidence left behind earlier in the night—the cuff-link, which, the housemaid had stated, lay in plain view before the door of the den?

If not he, then who in that household would have attempted to change the appearance of the room in which the dead man sat? Who would have had the necessary strength of character and nerve to have conceived such a plan, and have carried it to fruition? Only two, from Gaunt's observations, and both of these were women. Barbara Ellerslie would have been capable of it; but the only motive strong enough to impel her to such an act would have been her conviction that her little sister was guilty. That was a matter which might still remain to be looked into. If, on the other hand, the elder Mrs. Appleton had chanced to enter the room of death in the early hours of the morning, she would have had the strongest motive in the world for attempting to conceal the true state of affairs. Her denunciatory cry of "Cain!" when she stood beside her dead son's body proved that, momentarily at least, she had thought Yates guilty of his brother's murder. Yet, she had

proceeded to send at once for the detective with the biggest reputation of his time. Gaunt found himself back at the same point of reasoning as on the previous day.

They reached the Calthorp, an ornate and imposing bachelor apartment, a stone's-throw from the avenue, and Saunders guided him to the apartment that Yates Appleton had arranged to take on the previous day.

“I think Mr. Appleton is in; but I doubt if he'll see you,” the clerk at the desk had informed them. “He's been saying he's out to everyone who's called; but he hasn't 'phoned down any orders to us about it, so I guess you can go right up.”

“Oh, he will see me, I'm sure,” Gaunt replied easily, with an engaging smile, and stepped into the elevator.

As they pressed the bell at the door of the apartment, they distinctly heard a hurrying about within and a hasty snapping sound, as of the lids of trunks or suit-cases being hurriedly closed. Then, after a little, James appeared at the door.

“Oh, Mr. Gaunt!” he said. “It's too bad, sir! I suppose you wanted to see Mr. Appleton? He's gone away.”

“Surely he hasn't gone yet,” returned the detective, stepping resolutely into the hall of the apartment. Saunders waited rather uncertainly outside. “You haven't finished repacking yet.”

“No, sir. I—I'm to follow him, sir.”

"Where is Mr. Appleton going, James?"

"I d-don't know, sir." The man was plainly agitated. "He's to let me know where to go to him, and when."

"It's very strange that he should go away like this," Gaunt remarked. "I do not think he intended it yesterday, else you would not have unpacked, and now be repacking again."

"No. He—he decided quite suddenly, sir." The man seemed anxious, far too anxious, for the detective's departure. He added desperately, still holding the door open: "I'll tell him when I see him, sir, that you called."

"I'm quite sure he hasn't left the city—yet." Gaunt's tone was still bland; but there was an under-note of finality that increased the valet's perturbation. "He will probably return for a few moments at least, or telephone to you. I think I will wait."

"It won't be the slightest use, sir—" the man began hastily.

But Gaunt interrupted him sternly.

"I will wait."

"I'm very sorry, sir," James burst out, at last; "but I have strict orders from Mr. Appleton to admit no one, and I must obey him, sir."

"I am the detective employed in this case," the other thundered, "and I will remain here until Mr. Appleton returns! I shall go to Mrs. Finlay Appleton, or to the police, if necessary,

to enforce my demand. You are making things look very black for your master by behaving in this manner, James!"

"I—I was only trying to carry out his orders, sir," the valet faltered. "I'm sure I'm very sorry, sir. I don't suppose he meant them for you—he didn't have an idea that you were coming."

James closed the front door, shutting out the faithful Saunders, and led the way into the library.

The detective seated himself, and asked, turning his head from side to side as if glancing about him.

"Who else is in this apartment, James?"

"Here, sir?" the valet started nervously. "Why, no one, sir."

"I distinctly smell tobacco smoke," Gaunt remarked, very quietly.

There was a pause, and then James affirmed in a faint voice, as if the words were fairly dragged from him.

"It was—me, sir."

"You? Does Mr. Appleton permit you to smoke in his rooms?"

"Why—why, no, sir, of course not! But—but in his absence—"

"I understand. Very reprehensible of you, James, very! And what was it you were smoking—in Mr. Appleton's absence?"

"A—a cigar, sir."

"One of your master's?"

"No, sir. Mr. Appleton smokes cigarettes only."

"Then where did you get it, James?"

"I—I—I found it, sir," the valet blurted out.

"Where?" the question fell crisply from Gaunt's lips.

"Here, sir. The—the gentlemen who had these rooms before must have left it behind."

The detective smiled.

"Very well, James. I won't keep you any longer from your task. I will wait here, however, until we hear from Mr. Appleton."

And Gaunt waited. An hour passed, then two and three, and still he sat there patiently, while the valet finished his packing, and then hung nervously about, and the silence seemed to deepen so that the street-sounds were carried up to them with startling distinctness.

At length, the house telephone in the hall rang sharply, and, with an exclamation that sounded very much like one of relief, James hurried to it, with Gaunt at his heels. The hall was narrow, and the telephone hung on the wall, facing a closed door. As the detective paused just back of the valet at the instrument, he heard a slight, almost indistinguishable sound in the room behind him, which caused him to take a cautious step or two backward.

"Yes, sir," the valet was saying eagerly. "Is

that you, sir? Mr. Gaunt has been here a long time, waiting to see you. I told him you'd gone out of town; but he was sure you'd return, or telephone. What, sir? At his own rooms in an hour? Very good, sir; I'll tell him." The receiver clicked, and the valet turned hastily.

"It was Mr. Appleton, sir. I don't know where he is—he didn't say—but he hasn't left the city yet, sir, as you thought. He told me to say that he will call at your rooms in an hour, sir, to see you."

For answer, Gaunt turned and hurled himself at the closed door behind him. It yielded, and precipitated him within, and he sprang in the direction of a startled, quickly smothered curse that assailed his ears.

"Oh, no, Mr. Appleton!" he said. "I won't trouble you to come to my rooms. We'll have our little talk here and now. I thought your man was lying from the start; but I was sure of it when he said he had been smoking a cigar. The tobacco odor I noticed was that of a cigarette. That was a very ingenious scheme of yours, to call up your valet on the house 'phone, from your own private wire here in your room; but I heard your voice, and the click of the receiver, through the closed door. Now, we will come to an understanding!"

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE WATCHES OF THE NIGHT

“**W**ELL, you’ve got me, Gaunt!” the younger man said, sullenly. “I told James to say that I was out, because I didn’t want to be annoyed any more. I’m in a terrible state over this whole affair, I tell you—terrible! I’ll go crazy if I have to talk it over any more! That’s the only reason why I didn’t want to see you, or anyone. You didn’t think I was afraid of you, did you?” he added, in sudden bluster. “I’ve got nothing to hide!”

“I’m very glad to hear you say so, Mr. Appleton,” returned the detective. “Perhaps, in that case, you’ll tell me a few things I want to know.”

“I told you yesterday—” the young man began to protest.

But Gaunt cut him short.

“I want to know some of the things you did not tell me yesterday. But, first of all, I want to return this to you.”

He held out the little gold cuff-link. Yates Appleton drew back, his eyes fixed upon the outstretched hand of the other in a sort of horror.

“I—I don’t—” he began, huskily. “What is it? I never saw—”

"Oh, yes, you did," returned the detective. "It is your gold cuff-link, which you lost night before last. Don't you remember? When you reached your friend's rooms, Maurice Livingston's, from the club, he lent you a pair. He told me last night that he had done so."

"Why—yes," the younger man, admitted, in a tone of relief. "I had forgotten. That is mine, of course. Where was it found, Mr. Gaunt? At the club, or in the motor?"

"In neither place." The detective's tone was grave and stern. "It was found on the floor of the den, where it had rolled during your quarrel with your brother. It was loosened, probably, when you struck him that blow over the heart."

There was a tense silence for a moment, and then the young man, with a shuddering sob, buried his face in his hands.

"My God!" he moaned. "My God!"

"You bribed your chauffeur: why didn't you bribe the butler?" persisted Gaunt. "You should not have turned on him last night, and thrown him out of your rooms. It was dangerous, you see. He knew too much of what had gone on the night before."

"I couldn't! I didn't have the money," Yates Appleton muttered. "I promised the chauffeur a hundred not to say he'd taken me home from the club; but that cursed Dakers wanted a thousand down, and more to follow. He'd never have done

bleeding me, and, anyway, I didn't think he'd give it away so soon. I thought he'd wait and try again to get money out of me. It's all true, Mr. Gaunt! I did go home and quarrel with Garret, and—and strike him. But I didn't kill him! I swear to you, I didn't! I left him alive and as well as ever he was in his life!"

"Then suppose you tell me the whole truth," suggested Gaunt. "You see, I know all about your movements that night, and it's going to look very bad for you, if you don't tell everything now, frankly and honestly."

"I will, Mr. Gaunt! I'm only too glad to, and I want nothing so much as to have you find out who killed Garret!" the younger man returned, eagerly. "Only, I don't want you to make any mistake, and get after me. I'm innocent; but I know things look pretty black against me, and men have been convicted on circumstantial evidence long before this. There was bad blood between my brother and me, as a lot of people were aware, and, although the chauffeur knew I'd gone home for awhile, about midnight, I hadn't any idea, until last night, that the butler had seen or heard me. I suppose I should have been more politic with him; but I was unnerved by—by everything that had happened."

"Just what did happen, night before last, Mr. Appleton?"

"Well, you know of the lawsuit. I believe my

mother told you that it was just a test case, a friendly suit. It wasn't, entirely, although we stayed on in the house until the renovating of ours was completed, to save talk and gossip. There'd been too much of that, already. We've been pretty wild, I guess, Garret and I; but you can believe I'm going to be a different man, Mr. Gaunt! This terrible thing has pulled me up short, I can tell you! After the lawsuit was over, and I'd failed, Garret pulled the purse-strings tighter than ever, and wouldn't help me out with my debts, or anything. Night before last, I went to the Patriarchs', and gambled, and lost a lot of money. I gave my note for it, of course; but, as I was leaving, I overheard a remark that made me determined to pay up what I had lost, right then and there. I'd been drinking, too, and hitting up the—the other thing that you discovered, and I was wild—desperate! I went home, tackled my brother where I knew he'd be by himself, drinking in the den, and tried to get him to advance me the money. I might as well have tried to move a rock! He's always ugly when he's drinking; but that night he was worse than ever. He was highly excited, just about purple with rage, in fact, when I entered. Something must have happened, before I came in, to upset him. He cursed and reviled me, and I—well, I told you I was pretty well wrought up, myself. He goaded me on until I struck him. Then he ordered me from the house,

and, after a minute, I went. I discovered, after I was in the motor again, that I'd lost my cuff-link; but I borrowed one from Maurice Livingston. All the rest of the night you know. I went home again when I got ready. My brother and I'd had rows before, although we hadn't come to blows in years, and I knew it would all have blown over by the morning. You know what was found when morning came. I don't know who killed my brother. I wish to heaven I did! And I don't know who faked up that burglary stunt, if it was really faked up. But I know I'm innocent of any part in his death!"

"You would have done far better if you had told me all this frankly yesterday, Mr. Appleton," Gaunt remarked, quietly. "If you are innocent, as you say, there is one person who believed you guilty—your mother!"

"My mother!" the young man repeated, aghast.

"Have you forgotten what she said when she turned from the body of your brother and found you standing in the doorway? She called you, 'Cain!'"

"She was unnerved, overwrought. What could be expected of a woman, a mother, at such a time? She was out of her mind with the shock and grief and horror. She didn't know what she was saying! She had known, of course, that there wasn't much love lost between Garret and me. She's witnessed some pretty bad quarrels between us, and just for

a minute she lost her senses, and accused me. She saw, though, almost immediately, how unjust, how impossible, such a thing could be, and she sent at once for you, to find out the truth for us."

"Well, Mr. Appleton, the evidence, circumstantial as it is, would point, at this stage of the investigation, directly to you in the eyes of the officials, the police. It would be useless for me to deny that. The fact that you bribed one servant, and would have bribed another had it been within your power to accede to his requests, to conceal your return to the house, to the room in which your brother was afterward found murdered, would look very bad for you, from Inspector Hanrahan's point of view. However, there are one or two points in your favor, which he might overlook, and I won't put the evidence I have obtained in his hands just yet. But you must give me your word of honor not to leave town, not to try any more tricks like that of this morning. You must be where I can reach you instantly at any hour of the day or night; for, if you are really as anxious as you say you are to discover who killed your brother, I may want your help."

"Of course, Mr. Gaunt, I can't thank you enough, sir, for your forbearance!" Tears of weakness and gratitude rose in the young man's eyes, and he brushed them away with a trembling hand. "I'm sure you know as well as I do that I had nothing

to do with Garret's death; but I might have a hard time proving it to the police, and, as you say, appearances are against me. Of course, I want to know who killed my brother; but, if it wasn't a burglar, and you've seemed to prove that it wasn't, isn't there a chance that he might have committed suicide?"

"In that case, who would have prepared the burglary evidence, and what became of his jewelry and money?" asked Gaunt.

The other was silent.

"No, Mr. Appleton," the detective remarked conclusively, "your brother was murdered, and for a motive other than that of paltry robbery. We may be sure of that. I must be off now. You will give me your word to be on hand when I need you again?"

"My word of honor, Mr. Gaunt, and please believe that I appreciate what you have done for me. You might have had me placed under arrest, I know, on the evidence you have, and, although I should have been cleared, of course, in time, I should never have been able to live it down, and the disgrace and notoriety would have about killed my mother. If my brother did not commit suicide, I'm as anxious as you, and more, to know who killed him."

Gaunt found Saunders waiting faithfully in the hall, and went swiftly home, for a quick bite. It was after two o'clock in the afternoon, and he

still had much to do that day. He saw to it that the chauffeur, too, had some lunch, and immediately afterward motored to the Appletons'.

The butler grew pale on seeing him; but the detective brusquely ignored their interview of the morning, and asked to see Miss Ellerslie.

She came to him almost at once, in the library. Her low voice was faint and quivering with anxiety, and the hand she extended to him was cold.

"Your sister, Mrs. Appleton?" he asked. "I trust that she is better, that she has rallied a little from the shock of yesterday?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Gaunt, she is ill, very dangerously ill." She seemed scarcely to breathe the words.

He murmured a conventional regret, [scarcely knowing the words he uttered. The strange spell her mere presence had exercised over him on the previous day, seemed intensified. She held herself less in reserve, as if her anxiety had beaten down a tithe of her supreme self-control.

"Can you tell me," he added, "about how soon Mrs. Appleton will be able to see me? I'll promise faithfully not to shock her, or annoy her. It is something entirely impersonal about which I wish to consult her."

"Not for many days. She is so ill that perhaps her very life is in danger—perhaps her reason. The doctor is with her now, and has called in a specialist."

"I did not realize it was as serious as that. Believe me, Miss Ellerslie, I am deeply sorry for her, and for you, too, in your anxiety. May I ask you just a few questions? I won't keep you long from your sister."

"Certainly, Mr. Gaunt." But, as she spoke, he heard a slight tinkling, drumming sound. She had reached over unconsciously, and picked up one of the small silver or bronze ornaments from the writing-table, and was playing with it idly between her trembling fingers.

"Miss Ellerslie, you said yesterday that, when you returned from the wedding the night before, your old nurse, Mammy Lu, told you that your sister was awake and nervous, and you went in just as you were, in the costume you had worn at the wedding reception, and remained with her until she was quiet."

The tinkling rattle stopped suddenly.

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt, I did."

"You did not, before you went up-stairs and encountered the maid, go near the den?"

"No."

"And, after your sister was quiet, did you go immediately to your room and retire, or did you descend to the room where your brother-in-law was?"

There was a sudden, loud snap. The paper-knife, which Miss Ellerslie had held, had broken in two in her sudden, convulsive grasp. She laid

the pieces mechanically on the table before she answered quietly:

"I went directly to my room, and retired."

"Directly after leaving your sister, you mean?"

"Directly after leaving my sister." Her voice had lost the low, thrilling timbre, and held the curious, sad, controlled note of the previous day.

"And the next thing you heard was the housemaid's screams, when she went to the den, the following morning?"

"That is so, Mr. Gaunt."

"Yet you did not sleep well; you were, in fact, awake most of the night, were you not?"

"Why—I think not; I am not sure. I am usually a light sleeper, and I was worried by my sister's nervous condition; but I believe that I slept rather well."

"Marie, the maid of the elder Mrs. Appleton, heard you walking the floor a great deal during the night. Her room is directly above yours, you know."

There was a slight pause, and then the girl's voice sounded upon his ear with its natural soft drawl intensified, almost as if with studied effect:

"Did she? She must have exaggerated—she is very excitable. I occasionally pace up and down the floor of my room, when sleep will not come to me; but I fancy I did so no more on the night before last than at any other time—I am subject to insomnia."

"When you entered the house, Miss Ellerslie, on your return from the wedding, did you hear any sound from the direction of the den? A sound, for instance, of two voices—men's voices—raised in an altercation?"

"Oh, no!" The genuine surprise in her voice made it rise a tone or two with the thrilling sweetness of a bird's note. "There was no sound whatever."

"Was there no light on the lower floor?"

"Only the hall light, which is always left burning all night, until the maids or butler come down in the morning, and a faint radiance, which seemed to come from the direction of the den, quite as if my brother-in-law was sitting in there as usual, and the door was open—the door of the den, I mean."

Gaunt pondered a moment. The housemaid, Katie, had stated to him on the previous day that, when she entered the den in the early morning and found a cuff-link, and later the body of her master, there had been no light whatever in the den, save that from the one opened window. Whoever, then, had changed the appearance of the room after the tragedy, had put out the light.

"And during the night you heard no sound whatever, Miss Ellerslie? Forgive me for repeating my questions to you, but I am trying to recall any sound which may have reached your ears during your wakeful hours, but which you

dismissed from your thoughts as of no significance."

There was silence for a moment, and then she answered with the air of finality:

"No, Mr. Gaunt; not the slightest sound whatever."

"Very well, Miss Ellerslie. I won't keep you from your sister any longer. My chauffeur is waiting in the vestibule."

But even as she opened the library-door, Dakers appeared upon the threshold.

"Mr. Force and Mr. Witherspoon are in the drawing-room, Miss Ellerslie. They wish to know if they can see you for a moment."

After a slight, but obvious, hesitation, the girl said:

"Yes, Dakers, tell them I will come at once."

Then, as the butler disappeared down the hall, she turned again to the detective. "Mr. Gaunt, I told you yesterday of my engagement to Mr. Randolph Force, and that I meant to break that engagement, and remain with my sister. I have reconsidered." Then, with a little smile: "That is supposed to be a woman's prerogative, isn't it? I mean that I shall stay with my sister, but permit the engagement to go on, for a time at least. I trust that you will hold what I told you yesterday in the strictest confidence."

"Certainly, Miss Ellerslie. I wonder if Mr. Force would call on me this evening, in my rooms? I will perhaps be able to obtain from him some

data concerning the Appleton family which others have been unable to give me. It was for this reason I wished an interview with your sister."

"I can tell you all you wish to know about the Appleton family, Mr. Gaunt; as much as my sister or Mr. Force could." There was an unconscious note of anxiety in her voice.

"No; the data I wish go further back into history, things that only an old New Yorker and contemporary of theirs, a man of their set, could tell me." His voice was very gentle, but there was a graver note in it, almost a command, as he added: "Please, tell Mr. Force I will be at home at nine."

She sighed a little, and her voice, as she replied, was so low as to be almost inaudible. "I will tell him, Mr. Gaunt."

"Thank you. May I trouble you with one more question—this time an irrelevant one? Why is your hair all wet about your forehead?"

"My hair?" she repeated in surprise, putting her hands quickly to her head. Her hair was lying in flat, damp tendrils about her face. "Oh, yes! They—they were bathing my forehead."

"Ah! You, too, were—ill, Miss Ellerslie?"

"I—I fainted, just a few minutes before you came," she confessed. "It was silly of me, of course. I don't remember ever having done such a thing before. I have been quite unnerved by my anxiety over my sister."

"I understand. I am deeply sorry for you both."

As they moved away from the library door together, she asked, in a strange tone, as if something impelled her to voice the question, quite without her own volition:

"Mr. Gaunt, how—how did you know my hair was wet?"

"Oh, that?" he smiled. "There is a peculiar odor about moistened hair, which is distinctly noticeable, and like nothing else in the world. Good-afternoon, Miss Ellerslie."

CHAPTER IX

DORIS

ON leaving the Appleton house, Gaunt's car sped swiftly to the Blenheim, where Mrs. Finlay Appleton had taken up her abode.

"Have you any news for me, Mr. Gaunt?" she inquired anxiously, when he was admitted to her presence. "This strain is terrible. I would welcome almost any news, if it was news."

"We have succeeded in eliminating a number of irrelevant facts, Mrs. Appleton; but you must be patient. There is much work ahead for us, until we can see clearly to the end. I have come to ask if I may have a few moments' interview with your maid, Marie."

"With my maid?" Mrs. Appleton's tone was loftily amazed. "I cannot see what evidence my maid would be able to give, Mr. Gaunt, aside from the chatter of the servants' hall—idle gossip of which there has been far too much already."

Mr. Gaunt smiled deprecatingly, and said in the tone he could so well assume on occasion:

"Well, we must leave no stone unturned, you know, and there is often much that goes on in a household of which sharp-eyed servants are cognizant, when the mistress is not." Mrs. Apple-

ton cleared her throat in a manner which indicated that, although this might be the case in some households, it was not true of one over which she ruled; but the detective's next question changed her thoughts suddenly into a new and alarming channel.

"Mrs. Appleton, I do not like to distress you by a reference to the painful scene of yesterday morning, but believe me, it is necessary. When you rushed down-stairs in response to the screams of your housemaid, and discovered the body of your eldest son, Mr. Yates Appleton, I understand, was not present. When he appeared in the doorway, you turned and spoke to him. Do you remember what you said?"

"H-m!" the elderly lady hesitated. Then she replied in obvious haste: "No, Mr. Gaunt, I do not. I do not even remember I noticed him there. At any rate, what does it matter? What could it matter what a woman said at such a time?"

"It matters a great deal," the detective replied, quietly. "It was most significant."

"I do not remember what it was," Mrs. Appleton reiterated, quickly. "It could not have been significant, for it was said unconsciously. I was beside myself."

"You called your son, 'Cain!' That, Mrs. Appleton, is the name of the oldest fratricide on record. You are a woman, if you will pardon me,

of very superior mentality. You say, or do, nothing without reason. When you branded your son with that name, you considered him the murderer of his brother."

"Ah, no, no, Mr. Gaunt! You exceed the power I myself have vested in you, in this case. The application was not a literal one, but a reproach for the words my son had uttered to his elder brother in a late quarrel. I see that I must tell you, in order to avert a terrible mistake on your part. My sons were the most loving of brothers." The detective's face was a study. "But Garret was the more prudent of the two; Yates the spendthrift. They were both of violent temper, and their frequent quarrels would have sounded quite fearful to those who did not know that they meant not a word of it, and that the whole matter would be forgotten in an hour or two.

"Their quarrels, of course, were only about money. During a recent one—very recent—Yates told Garret he wished he was dead. It was in reference to that, if anything, that I used the word 'Cain,' if I did so. I don't remember it, as I say; but I do know that the memory of that quarrel returned to me, when I turned from my dead to my living son. Had such a preposterous suspicion as that which you surmise entered my head, do you not think that I would have shielded my son all that I possibly could from the consequences of his act—if not for his own sake, at

least, to save the family name from disgrace? Yet, I sent at once for the police, and for the highest authority on the detection of crime in this country—for you, Mr. Gaunt.”

He accepted the compliment gravely, and said:

“Will you tell me then, Mrs. Appleton, why, after having retained me to discover the truth for you, you were not entirely frank with me?”

She half-rose from the chair.

“My dear Mr. Gaunt—” she began indignantly.

But he silenced her.

“You told me that the whole suit between your two sons was a test case, an entirely amicable affair; yet Mr. Yates Appleton has told me it was not so. He has admitted, to use his own words: ‘That there was bad blood between him and his elder brother.’”

The lady bit her lip, and then said, more vehemently than she had spoken;

“But can you not see, Mr. Gaunt, I knew that the differences between my sons were absolutely irrelevant to this case, as I informed you during our first interview? I do not see any further need of talk and raking up of scandal.”

“That is all, Mrs. Appleton. May I see your maid now?”

“Yes. If you will step into my dressing-room you will find her—the door there, just at the right of your chair.”

With a bow, he entered the next room, closing

the door gently, but decisively, behind him, and heard the rattle of spools and scissors, as the maid rose hastily at his unexpected entrance.

"*M'sieu* Gaunt!"

"Marie, I want a word with you. To whom did you telephone the news of the murder, immediately after it was discovered, this morning?"

"I, *m'sieu*? To no one. Why should *m'sieu* think that I—"

"You were overheard telephoning the news of the death of Mr. Garret Appleton to some one. Who was it?"

"If *m'sieu* does not jest, someone has been telling him an untruth. I have telephone' to no one."

"I suppose you know, Marie, that the Central Exchange can be compelled on a court order to give the number which you called on the 'phone at that hour. Of course, if you wish me to carry the matter to Mrs. Appleton, or Judge Carhart—"

"Ah, in that case," the maid interrupted, with superb insolence, "if *m'sieu* knows the number I called, why does he question me?"

"You called Miss Carhart, to warn her in advance of the death—of the murder—of Mr. Garret Appleton. You thought she would wish to know privately before the news reached her house. Why did you think she would wish to know?"

"Well, *Mademoiselle* Carhart is *vairy* young and a great friend of the family. She had dined

there only the night before, and I thought that the shock—”

“No, Marie, I want the truth. You are in Mrs. Appleton’s employ, not Miss Carhart’s. Why should you telephone this news to her privately?”

The maid shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of surrender.

“*M’sieu*, if you must know, there had been a leetle affaire—how do you say?—a flirtation. Oh, of an innocence absolutely, between *M’m’selle* Carhart and *M’sieu* Appleton. *M’sieu* had confided in me. I had carried a note—a leetle lettair, once or twice; but it was nothing—nothing to which anyone could object. But I—I imagine that *mademoiselle* had become so greatly interested in *m’sieu* that, if the sudden news of his death came to her in the presence of her father, she might—might pairhaps give herself away. I like the young *mademoiselle*, so *jolie*, so ingenious, and I am romantic—me.”

“And you were well paid, I suppose, for carrying these notes, eh?”

“But yes.” The maid’s tone suggested surprise at the superfluous question. “Both *M’sieu* Appleton and *Mademoiselle* Carhart were most generous.”

“And that was all; just that Mr. Garret Appleton permitted you to know of—his flirtation? And you carried notes once or twice. You saw nothing at any time, in the Appleton home, or elsewhere,

between these two; no confidential meetings—in the den, say, or elsewhere?”

“Oh, but yes, *m’sieu*, I have eyes. Once or twice, when there was a large reception, or dinner, or dance, on at the house of *M’sieu* Appleton, they would slip away for a little talk of but a minute or two in the hall, or library, or—or den.”

“Marie, did you see them in the den on the night of the murder?”

“The evening before, after dinner, *m’sieu* means? It is possible. After *Madame* Appleton—*Madame* Garret Appleton—had retired, I passed along the hall from the staircase leading from the servant’s dining-room up to *Madame* Appleton’s, my mistress’s, to prepare her things for the night. I pass the door of the den, and I see then *M’sieu* Appleton and a lady. I did not turn and look in, I glanc’ with the corner of my eye, and I could not see who the lady was, but I think it was *Made-moiselle* Carhart.”

“Very well, Marie. That was all I wanted of you. Only, if Inspector Hanrahan comes to you, do not lie to him. You might find yourself in serious trouble.”

As the maid turned, with a sigh of relief, to show him to the door, he stopped.

“Why do you sew without a thimble?” he asked, with the whimsical smile that always accompanied his sudden, irrelevant questions. “You are proud of your hands, yet you permit the middle finger to

become all roughened and abraded, from the needle-head."

"I cannot sew wiz ze theemble. Eet ees what you call—eccentricitee, pairhaps? But how, *m'sieu*—"

"I heard the rough skin of your finger rasp against your starched apron, as you turned, just now. And I knew you were proud of your hands, because you keep your nails so unusually long and pointed."

With a little cry of dismay, the woman thrust both her hands behind her.

"If *m'sieu* will pardon—but when did *m'sieu* discover zat?"

"Yesterday, when you came to the library of the Appleton house, at the time I sent for you for an interview, and you tapped upon the door before entering. . . . I must go now. Remember what I have told you. Speak the truth to Inspector Hanrahan when he comes, or you may have cause for regret."

He took leave of Mrs. Appleton, and, with the aid of a bell-boy, made his way to his car. There was one errand yet before him, and one which he anticipated with reluctance, persuaded as he was in his own mind that the affair between Garret Appleton and the Judge's daughter had been innocent of what the world regards as the one unpardonable wrong, in whatever despicable light it might be considered otherwise. He felt he must

get at the truth of the matter, and that from the girl herself.

On arrival at the Carharts', he was shown to the drawing-room, and she came to him almost immediately. Her uneasiness at his visit was plainly evidenced in her voice, as she greeted him.

"Miss Carhart," he said very gravely, "did you acquaint your father at once, yesterday morning, of the death of Mr. Garret Appleton?"

"My father?" she faltered. "Why, it was he who told me. The news was brought to him."

The detective shook his head.

"I mean, when Marie, Mrs. Appleton's maid, telephoned you."

"Telephoned me? Marie telephoned me?" Her voice was scarcely above a whisper, and it seemed as if she could do no more than echo his words.

"Miss Carhart," he went on, "whatever you say to me, if you are perfectly frank, will be strictly confidential; but if you do not disclose the whole truth, I may be compelled to carry the matter to your father. I must know the exact relations which existed between you and Garret Appleton."

The girl rose to her feet indignantly.

"How dare you!" she cried. "What do you mean to insinuate? My father would be the first to order you from this house, if you dared to approach him with any story which reflected upon my reputation."

"Nevertheless," he went on doggedly, "I know,

and can prove, that an affair of some sort existed between you and the man whose death I am investigating. I know that Marie, his mother's maid, frequently carried messages from him to you; that she knew, and admits the knowledge, of an affair between you, and that she will so testify, if necessary, and that she telephoned you privately of his death, in order that you might not betray your shock to your father, when the news reached you officially."

The girl, who had seated herself, clasped and unclasped the arms of her chair nervously, and beat a little angry tattoo with her foot upon the floor.

"If you must know, Mr. Gaunt," she said at last, with a little, quick intake of breath, "I did have a sort of flirtation with Garret Appleton; but it was an entirely innocent affair, the same sort of thing that goes on every day in society. We had been engaged at one time, and it was only natural that I should want to—to pique his wife, and punish him for his defection. I hadn't married, because I never found any one whom I—liked, as I had liked Garret, and I did not think he should have married, either. I knew that he and his wife weren't happy, weren't getting along together, and I flirted with him a little, deliberately; but I never saw him alone, nor was indiscreet in any possible way. Don't you understand, Mr. Gaunt? It was only to punish him."

"You did see him alone. Marie has come upon you often in his own house, talking very confidentially."

"But that was only when an affair was on at his house, at which all our set were present. He might have talked as frequently, and said the same things, to any other young girl of his mother's or wife's acquaintance."

"When was the last time you saw him alone, Miss Carhart?"

"Really, I—I don't remember."

"Was it the night before his death, Miss Carhart?"

"Oh, naturally, if you call that seeing him alone. After his wife had retired, we stayed in the library, talking, where my father and Mrs. Finlay Appleton were playing cards, and then—yes, we did drift into the music-room, which opens from the library, and I played a little, I think."

"And that was all? You did not enter the den, Miss Carhart?"

"No, Mr. Gaunt."

The detective rose.

"Miss Carhart, you will recall what I said to you at the commencement of this interview? If you are not absolutely frank with me, I must go to your father. Will you tell me if he is at home?"

"I don't know what you mean! I am absolutely frank with you."

"You were in the den alone with Mr. Appleton, the night before his death. You were seen there."

"I—was seen there?"

"I will be more frank than you have been. After Mrs. Garret Appleton had retired, Marie passed along the hall before the half-open door of the den, and saw you there with Mr. Appleton."

There was a pause, and then the girl said, with a little break in her voice:

"I see there is no use attempting to withhold anything from you, Mr. Gaunt. I only attempted to do so because I wanted you to be sure in your own mind of the truth—that my flirtation with Mr. Appleton was only that, and nothing more. I was in the den with Mr. Appleton. He took me in there ostensibly to show me some new curios he had recently purchased, but he really wanted to talk to me alone. You see, he had taken our little flirtation more seriously than I.

"My father had planned to take me abroad next week for the winter, and he was quite broken up about it. I was really sorry that I had ever started to play this rather cruel little—joke on him when I realized now how badly he felt, and I was a little frightened, too; so I cut our conversation short, and returned to the library, where my father was. That is all, Mr. Gaunt—really, really all! And now that this—this terrible thing has come, I feel so differently about it all—so deeply

sorry that I have caused Mrs. Garret Appleton any pain—so sorry that I—I played with fire!”

“I am glad that you have been frank with me, Miss Carhart. I believe that you have been; but I must know a little more. In that interview with him in the den, did Mr. Appleton make any violent demonstration of affection toward you, any suggestions or proposals for the future?”

“No, not exactly,” the girl returned, hesitatingly. “He was very much wrought-up and excited, and didn’t seem to be quite—quite himself. He said that he could not bear the thought of my departure for Europe—of my being where he could not see me sometimes; and, when he saw how aghast I was that things had drifted so far between us in his estimation, he accused me of flirting with him, of wilfully leading him on, which was just—just what I had been doing, Mr. Gaunt, only I—it sounded so awful, put into words.

“I was very indignant, and told him so. I—I reminded him of the respect due to the woman up-stairs. Oh, I said all the hypocritical things that a girl usually says when she had been playing with a man, and gets found out, and then I cut out the conversation short, and went back to the library.”

“And he came with you?”

“Yes; but he was sullen, and in an injured mood, of course, although he quelled it before my father.

Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable, and I was glad when the time came for us to go home."

"And you heard nothing further?"

"Nothing until Marie called me up, and told me of—of his death."

"Miss Carhart, did you know of any enemies—any active enemies—whom Mr. Appleton may have had? Did he ever tell you of any difficulty he was in, or trouble?"

"No; he only spoke, in a general way, of his unhappiness at home—the sort of thing a married man always says when he wants sympathy—that he isn't understood."

"That is all, Miss Carhart. I won't trouble you any longer."

He turned toward the door; but she laid a small, detaining hand on his arm.

"I know that you think I am horrid, Mr. Gaunt; that I don't deserve any—respect, or anything. But it was only a petty malicious impulse—my flirting with him, I mean, and I yielded to it. If you could know how sorry I am!"

The detective smiled a little.

"We all do things which we are sorry for, at one time, or another, Miss Carhart, and it is past. You may be sure that your confidence will be respected. Good-afternoon."

His thoughts on the way home were far from satisfied ones. If Yates Appleton was not guilty of his brother's death, his investigation seemed

to have made little or no headway. He had, to be sure, cleared up a number of false clues; but they had been fairly obvious from the start, and he seemed to be working in circles, wasting valuable time, and getting no nearer the real truth. Could it be that another line of investigation lay open to him, which he had almost wilfully overlooked for the multiplicity of clues that lay more readily within reach? Had he, because of his blindness, missed some essential detail, failed to discover some salient point, some significant finger-post, which, to his trained faculties, would have pointed unmistakably to the truth? He writhed in spirit.

Why had fate endowed him with the abilities, the genius, which he possessed, and denied to him the greatest of all attributes in the life-work which he had chosen?

CHAPTER X

A NEW TURNING

WHEN Gaunt reached his rooms, he found Inspector Hanrahan impatiently pacing the floor of his library.

"Thought you would never come, Mr. Gaunt," he said. "I have been waiting for you nearly an hour. Have you come upon anything?"

"Running down a lot of false clues; clearing out the underbrush, that's about all." Gaunt could not quite keep the bitterness he felt from manifesting itself in his voice.

"Ah-ha! Well, I've come on something we've never even thought of looking into. We've taken the case up from the time of the murder, or at least the evening before. But how about the day before, Mr. Gaunt? Did it occur to you to find out how Garret Appleton spent the last day of his life?"

The detective concealed his chagrin with an effort. Could this be the line of investigation that he had overlooked, not because of his blindness, but because of a crass stupidity of reasoning which was plainly unaccountable.

"Can't say that it did, Inspector. I have been too busy following up the clues we already had."

"Well!" The Inspector settled back in a chair

with immense satisfaction. "When I'd run that Louis Lantelme business to earth, and found there was nothing in it, there didn't seem a single thing left to go on; so I thought I'd cast backward a little. In the first place—I got this from Louis—for the last two or three months Mr. Appleton has had something on his mind—something besides his family troubles, and all that, I mean. He kept it pretty much to himself; but his man knew it—trust a valet, or a lady's maid, to know as much about the people they work for as they know about themselves.

"As far as Louis could make out, it started with an article his master read in the newspaper about three months ago. He seemed very much excited, and did some mysterious telephoning; but the valet didn't hear the numbers, and didn't know what it was about. After Mr. Appleton had gone out, the valet looked carefully through that page of the paper which had upset his master; but he couldn't find anything in it which, to his mind, would seem to have any bearing on Mr. Appleton's affairs.

"He would have forgotten all about it, only from that minute his master seemed a changed man; to him, at least. More irritable than ever, and anxious—not as if he was afraid, but as if he was worried about to death. Once in the last month while Louis was in his employ, Mr. Appleton had gone away alone—just over night. He's always taken Louis with him before, and that was

what impressed it upon the valet's mind as being unusual. Moreover, when he returned, he seemed more depressed and worried than ever."

Inspector Hanrahan paused as if for commendation; but the detective merely asked quietly:

"Anything else?"

"Not from Louis Lantelme. You know he was discharged about a month ago. But when I went at the butler with this line of questioning, I got a few more facts. I told you I thought that fellow had something up his sleeve. It seems that, about three weeks ago, Mr. Appleton received a letter with a special-delivery stamp, quite late one evening.

"There was a dinner on at the house and lots of guests there; but he excused himself and went out in his car. He didn't return until nearly six in the morning, and Dakers, whom he had told to wait up for him—and I guess from the way the fellow talked he was well paid for it—says the car was splashed from end to end with mud, as if it had had a long run, through heavy roads—although it hadn't rained in New York that night."

"Not so much in that," the detective remarked.

"The morning before his death, Mr. Appleton received another special-delivery letter. This time, Mr. Appleton went out in his car, immediately, as before; but he returned about five o'clock in the afternoon, and, from then until dinner time, Dakers was pretty busy bringing him drinks. He

did not seem anxious or worried then, but madder than the deuce.

"We couldn't get a thing out of Mr. Appleton's chauffeur, at first. He and Mr. Yates each had their own, you know, and Mr. Garret's is a stolid German, and I suspect was paid to keep his mouth shut. But, after we had been at him for awhile, he said he had driven Mr. Appleton, on the day before his death, to a road-house away up on the Boston Post Road, where he's had his own lunch, and waited for three hours for his employer. Then he brought him straight home.

"I got the name of the road-house from him. It's The Rocky Point Inn, and I'm going up there for dinner tonight, and find out what Garret Appleton did during those three hours and whom he met, and then I am going to trace them, if I can.

"As to the time before, when they went on that all-night trip, they went over to Jersey, by way of Staten Island and Perth Amboy Ferry, to a farmhouse half-way between Metuchen and New Brunswick. I have got two men out there now, with the chauffeur to show them the house, and see what we get out of that."

"What do you think, yourself, Inspector? Got a theory?"

"I think they're the most confoundedly mysterious bunch I ever came in contact with. Mr. Garret Appleton was in some secret mix-up of his

own, as sure as you are alive—nothing criminal, or anything of that sort, I think; but something he didn't take his family into his affairs about. They were a swift couple, those two brothers, from all I have been able to gather. They've kept the family in hot water and themselves just out of scare-heads in the newspapers since their college days; but I think I'm on the trail of something at last."

"You have done a lot, Inspector; but I don't quite see where it comes in connection with the murder. Do you?"

"No," Inspector Hanrahan admitted. "I don't quite see that yet myself; but it may come out later. Anyway, it's worth sifting to the bottom. We've not got any other clue to go on."

"Of course," Gaunt said musingly, as if to himself, "if any outsider, who has not come into the case as yet, committed the murder, he must have had an ally in the house to let him in, in the first place, and then attempt to conceal traces of the crime afterward, and that hardly seems feasible, since no one seems to have known of this private matter except Garret Appleton, himself."

"How about that butler, Dakers? I've had my eye on him from the first. I cannot help feeling, somehow, that he holds the key to the whole thing."

The Inspector had risen, and Gaunt rose with him.

"Inspector, it's well that you've no stealthy criminal to trail tonight—a criminal with trained ears and a sense of humor," the detective remarked jestingly. "If you had, your task would be hopeless from the start."

"Why?" The Inspector reddened, and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I don't get you, Mr. Gaunt."

"Your boots, man! I could hear you coming three hundred yards away. You've taken to wearing that soft goat's-skin, again, machine-sewn, and you creak like a windlass!" He clapped the discomfited official on the back in friendly fashion, and added: "Well, let me know if you get anything, and, if I learn anything, definitely, you'll hear from me. Turn about is only fair play, and we seem to be working together on this thing."

"Yes, sir. I've not forgotten the pointer you gave me last night—to watch that butler. To be sure," he added hastily, "I have suspected him all along, as I've said, of knowing something; but it sort of confirmed it, when I found he'd impressed you the same way. You'll hear from me in the morning, sir."

After he had departed, Gaunt dined hastily, and then spent the intervening time before the anticipated arrival of Randolph Force at the telephone. His several short conversations seemed to bring him no satisfaction, however, and he

turned from his own thoughts with a distinct feeling of relief, when his visitor was announced.

Randolph Force's step was firm and steady, his handclasp warm and vigorous, his voice low and rich. He brought in with him a breath of the cool, clean outdoors and a faint odor of good tobacco. Gaunt felt instinctively drawn to this man, who was the affianced husband of the woman who had so deeply impressed him.

He seemed, even in the first few moments of their meeting, to be a fit mate for her, strong and controlled and ringing true.

"Mr. Gaunt? Miss Ellerslie told me you wished to see me. If I can be of any assistance—"

"Sit down, Mr. Force. I wanted some information, in a general way, concerning the Appleton family—the men of the family, in particular—from one who had known them well, yet who was not one of their intimate associates. I thought that you would be able to give it to me."

The other man laughed pleasantly.

"I've known them always—the two boys, I mean. What makes you think I am not an associate of theirs?"

"Because Miss Ellerslie tells me that she is engaged to you. She would not be likely, I think, to choose her future husband from among the confrères of her brother-in-law."

There was a moment's pause, and then the young man said gravely:

"I see your point, Mr. Gaunt. As a matter-of-fact, although my family and the Appletons have been closely allied socially for three generations, I've never gone around very much with Garret and Yates. Our interests—let us say, our ideas of amusement—differ."

"Can you tell me—confidentially, of course—something of the two men, Mr. Force—something of their characters and pursuits?"

"That's rather a difficult proposition. A man doesn't like to discuss other men, from a personal standpoint. Yates is rather an ass, I should say. No real downright harm in him; but he goes the pace, and his friends make a fool of him, generally. With Garret—hang it all! one shouldn't speak ill of the dead—but the same tendencies Yates manifests had sunk in deeper in him, if you know what I mean—the tendency to consider vices a form of modern sport. With Yates, it is merely foolish weakness; with Garret, it had become sheer evilness. Yates drinks with his crowd; Garret alone. Yates is without moral stamina; Garret was deliberately, shrewdly vicious. You understand the distinction I am endeavoring to make?"

"Perfectly. You say that your family have been closely allied to that of the Appletons, for three generations? Can you tell me something of their antecedents?"

"Their father, Finlay Appleton, was a fine old

man, and a great friend of my late father's. Their grandfather, Appleton, started in life as an up-state farmer's boy, and died a multi-millionaire and power in Wall Street. Their mother was a Yates—one of the Tuxedo Yates. Her people were rich, too, but far from being as wealthy as the Appletons. Her father was a born miser, and would have done anything, gone to any lengths, to accumulate and hoard money. That is a trait which Garret Appleton had inherited to a marked degree. He, of course, entertained lavishly, and spent money with seeming extravagance; but it was only to keep up his position before the world, to gain the reputation of being a generous, but never spendthrift, millionaire.

"From his grandfather, Yates, he inherited an inordinate love of money for its own sake, and there have more than once been whispers in the Street that his operations were not entirely on the level; in fact, were perilously near the danger line. Of this, I think, his wife was in total ignorance; but then, as far as I can learn, he never took the trouble to make a companion or confidant of her."

"Being engaged to Miss Ellerslie, you must know of the conditions existing in the household of her brother-in-law."

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt; but I prefer not to speak of them. You understand that, even to aid you in your investigation, it would be impossible for me

to do so. Miss Ellerslie has told me that you are aware of the circumstances under which they lived, of the unhappiness of her sister's home life, and the hostile attitude assumed toward them by the other members of the family. Surely, that is sufficient, without going into details, which can have no bearing on the fact of Garret's death, and which really concern only the people involved? Really, it is a—a painful subject."

"I am going to be very frank with you, Mr. Force. I am going to assume that you, as a prospective member of the family, are cognizant, at least, of all the intimate, personal facts, which I, as a detective, have been able to glean in two days. I know that Mr. Appleton had transferred his affections from his wife to a young society girl, a frequent guest at his house, and that, partly in consequence of that, partly because of certain traits in his character, his behavior to his wife was brutal in the extreme. But I heard a suggestion, also, that young Mrs. Appleton herself was not without an opportunity of consoling herself, whether she availed herself of it, or not."

"What?" the young man roared, jumping to his feet. "They dared to do that! To utter a whisper against an innocent, deeply suffering woman! That was Yates, not his mother, I know. She is too jealous of the family honor, too fearful of gossip and scandal—of which she has already endured enough, through her sons—

to breathe a word against anyone who bore her name. It must have been Yates—the contemptible cur! Now I will speak, Mr. Gaunt!”

Randolph Force turned, and began pacing furiously up and down before the hearth; and Gaunt rested motionless in his chair, waiting for the other’s suddenly aroused indignation to find vent in speech. At length, Force stopped abruptly, facing the detective, and his words came with a rush:

“Natalie Appleton is as true and loyal a little woman, as gentle a spirit, as ever existed. She would not utter a word of complaint, of disparagement even, under all the weight of her husband’s intolerable cruelties. For he was cruel; not passionately, but systematically, fiendishly. Never mind how I know. It was not, I assure you, from her own lips. A man who was as constant a visitor at the house as I, the prospective husband of her sister, could not help but inadvertently observe much that was not meant for his eyes, hear much that was not meant for his ears, and come inevitably to know the truth.

“I did not need the gossip of the clubs and the business world—although I heard enough of it, heaven knows!—to know the sort of life she and her sister were leading. I tell you, Mr. Gaunt, if those two girls had had a single male relative living, Garret Appleton would have had a bullet in his heart long ago!”

He stopped suddenly, and, in the silence that

followed, Gaunt could hear the creaking of the heavy leather chair, as the young man flung himself back in his seat. Although the detective waited, he did not speak again, and the stillness deepened and was prolonged between them, until it seemed to hang, heavy and sentient, upon the air. At last, Gaunt himself broke the spell:

"You have known Miss Ellerslie long, Mr. Force?"

"Ever since she came North, to make her home with her sister. Although not intimate with either of the brothers, as I have said, our families were old friends, and I have been a frequent visitor, with my mother and sisters, at Mrs. Finlay Appleton's house. When Garret married, of course, I called, and admired his pretty, blonde little wife tremendously, even before I realized the strength of character that lay behind her physical frailty. Then—then I met Miss Ellerslie, and I—well, Mr. Gaunt, I imagine you know how it is with a man!"

He paused in a sudden access of boyish confusion, which was infinitely attractive after his outburst of very real indignation and the self-repression that had followed it. But the detective did not heed the tone so much as the words themselves. He, too, had experienced the magnetism that Barbara Ellerslie's mere presence bore with it, the music in the soft, drawling pulsation of her voice, the unnamable charm in the nearness of

her. The mention of her by the other man had seemed to evoke her actual being; it was as if she were there in that room, standing before him, before his sightless eyes. He could almost hear the sound of her light footfall, feel the brush of her skirt against his knee, the touch of her cool little hand; smell the fresh, pure fragrance of her, the perfume of her breath upon his cheek, as when she had leaned toward him in the earnestness of her disclosures of the previous day. . . . Oh, yes, he knew how it was with a man!

"You were—to have been married soon?" He heard his own voice quietly, steadily, breaking the silence.

"This autumn, if things had grown a little brighter for Natalie. I've had a splendid post offered me in Russia. I don't need the money, of course; but it is a wonderful opportunity in the diplomatic world. When it became evident that Barbara—that Miss Ellerslie could not leave her sister, I renounced it, of course, and now everything must be left to the future. I have hopes, though, that, when Natalie's health is restored from the effects of this frightful shock, and the long martyrdom she has endured, we three may go away together. I don't know why I am telling you this, Mr. Gaunt; but I wanted to make my own position in regard to the family plain to you."

"I quite understand. But, Mr. Force, you parried my implied question of awhile ago. Is

there no one, to your knowledge or belief, whose admiration and sympathy, perhaps, for young Mrs. Appleton, may have led to deeper feeling—on his part at least?”

He was all the detective now, cool, inscrutable, with a compelling firmness in his tones; and the other realized that the note of confidential friendliness, which for a moment had persuaded him to lower his own guard of reserve, was gone.

“There may be such a one, or more than one, as the problematical person of whom you speak, Mr. Gaunt. There may be one among the number who were welcome guests in her house, who realized her unhappiness, and recognized the beauty of her simple, childlike nature. But, if such a person exists, rest assured that he appreciates her stanchness, her loyalty, her innate purity, and he would be a cad indeed, if he’d ever allowed any thought other than that of the most disinterested compassion and highest friendship and honor to enter his mind in connection with her.”

“Thank you, Mr. Force. You have answered me. And, now, it is late, I know—I will not detain you longer. Thank you, too, for coming. When next you see Miss Ellerslie, please assure her that I shall hope soon to have good news for her.”

A quick, firm handclasp, a conventional phrase or two, the soft closing of the door, and Gaunt was alone. He sat for long hours in his solitary chair

before the empty hearth, musing. His thoughts could not have been altogether on the problem before him; for, now and then, a faint, almost reminiscent, smile crossed his thin, ascetic face, and once he turned his head quickly, as if at the sound of a soft footfall, or the silken rustle of a gown. And, once, he moved his slim, sensitive fingers lightly over the smooth leather arm of his chair, as if again for an instant his hand rested upon the head of a woman.

CHAPTER XI

AT HANRAHAN'S SUGGESTION

INSPECTOR HANRAHAN presented himself at Gaunt's rooms at an early hour, and it was plainly evident, in the exuberance of his handshake and his jubilant tone, that his self-satisfaction of the previous day had increased.

"You're on the trail, Inspector. I can tell from your manner that you have got the scent."

"I think I have, sir—I think I have. Whatever it leads to, Louis and the butler were right. There's something mysterious been going on that Garret Appleton was concerned with, all right."

"What did you learn at the inn, last night? Had Mr. Appleton met someone up there for a conference?"

"He had not. He was too clever for that. He wasn't going to give the chauffeur anything on him, if he could help it. He reached there about half-past twelve, and, after seeing that his chauffeur's wants would be attended to, instead of lunching there, he went into the bar alone, and had a drink, and then beat it out a side door, after looking carefully to see that his man had put the car up, and gone to the chauffeur's dining-room.

"An assistant bartender and one of the waiters,

who was serving a party on the side porch, saw him go across the fields—it's real country up there, you know—and disappear in a patch of woodland to the left. He stayed away until almost three o'clock, and, when he reappeared, there were two men with him; a short stoutish man, and a tall, younger one. That's all the description I could get of them from the waiter who saw them, because they halted at the edge of the field, talked together for a moment, and then Mr. Appleton came straight back to the inn."

"Did you investigate beyond that patch of woodland, Inspector," Gaunt asked, thoughtfully.

"Of course, I did; but it was dark, and I couldn't make out very much. After I found out all I could at the inn, I told the chauffeur of the car I hired to drive around by way of that patch of woods. He found a lane leading to it, after a little trouble, and we came upon a little farmhouse, painted white, or light yellow. I went in and asked for some water for the engine, and found out that a stolid old English couple, named Crabtree, lived there quite alone, and there isn't any other house for a long distance around; but back of their place is a short cut that leads into the Boston Post Road, near Greenwich."

"Did you learn anything else at the inn?"

"Only that, wherever Mr. Appleton had been, he hadn't had any lunch, and he hadn't time to get any there. He bolted down a couple of

sandwiches and another drink, while his chauffeur was bringing the car around, and they must have exceeded the speed limit going back to town, for, by the butler's testimony, he reached his own house at five or a little after."

"And the other end of the string—the men you sent down to Jersey, to the farm-house near New Brunswick? What have you heard from them?"

"Well, they ran up against a snag; but it's a significant one. A middle-aged couple lived there, a man and his wife, named Smith; but they have gone, and the house is deserted. They left about two weeks ago. They'd been living there for nearly four years. Their last year's lease had still about seven months to run, and they went unexpectedly, in a great hurry.

"My men got their information from the neighbors around. It seems this Smith rented the place from his next-door neighbor, who had a great big farm. The Smith's place was little and mean, and they paid only ten dollars a month for it. They seemed to be very poor, but far above the class around them—more like gentlefolks, down on their luck. That's all my men could find out. They didn't leave any address, or tell anyone where they were going, and they took only their trunks with them. The furniture—just a few cheap sticks which they brought with them when they came—they left standing in the house, I understand; so that looks as if they expected to come back.

"I think I'll run down myself, this afternoon, and have a look around; but I guess what you call the other end of the string is the best chance. I'll get back to that inn tomorrow in the daylight, and see if I can't find some trace of those two men, or someone who saw them come in an automobile or carriage, and remembers the direction."

"Have you any theory to fit the facts, Inspector?" asked the detective, with quiet humor.

The Inspector shifted rather uneasily.

"Well, sir, I haven't much to go on. But why should he have gone to that out-of-the-way hole in Jersey to have an interview with a perfectly respectable, middle-aged couple, who'd lived there four years; and then, a week later, they up and disappear? Then, on the very day before his death, he goes to another quiet spot in the country, and meets two men for a talk. If it's business, why don't they come to his office? If it's a family matter, why not see him in his home openly? There's a nigger in the woodpile, somewhere. It looks like blackmail to me. That's my theory—blackmail. They were getting money out of him for something, I'm pretty sure."

"You haven't any proof of that from what you have told me."

"Haven't I? Didn't he pay that couple in Jersey to get out of the way, and get out quick? And he was murdered within a few hours after his inter-

view with the two men—maybe he refused to give them any money; maybe he was tired of being bled, and told them so, and they took their revenge. I know it sounds like a Fourteenth Street melodrama, Mr. Gaunt; but, nevertheless, it's happening every day in real life, as you and I both know, and the police records can show. Anyway, I'm off to look up that Jersey couple."

When Inspector Hanrahan had departed, Gaunt took his watch from his pocket—a curious affair it was, made without a crystal, with strong hands and raised numerals, and the detective's fingers played delicately across the open face. It was just past eleven. Saunders could get him up to the Rocky Point Inn in good time for lunch. He would change places with the Inspector, who was going to Jersey, and the following day, when the police official went to the inn, Gaunt would, in turn, visit that empty farm-house near New Brunswick, and learn what he could of the couple with the significantly ordinary name.

After ordering the car, he called the Appleton house on the telephone, and, at his request, Miss Ellerslie came to the wire. He learned that young Mrs. Appleton, although still very ill, was resting more quietly, and, although she could not be disturbed by an interview for several days, the doctor thought her on the road to a safe and reasonably rapid recovery.

Jenkins announced the car, and Gaunt was soon

speeding up Broadway. The air was milder than on the previous day, and gave a hint of the coming Indian summer. The swift run through the warm air was delightful, and the detective listened eagerly to the noises of street life all about him, which gave place, gradually, to the sounds and smells of the country in the autumn; the groaning and creaking of heavily laden produce- and hay-wagons, the odor of drying leaves and ripening grain, and the wine-like scent of crushed and dying grapes.

They did not drive at breakneck speed, and it was half-past one before the car came to a grinding stop on the gravel driveway, before the entrance of the inn. To the head waiter, who came obsequiously to greet him, Gaunt said:

"I am lunching alone. I should like a table on the side porch—the left side of the house, nearest the door leading from the bar out to the driveway. See that my chauffeur has his luncheon also, please. He will guide me to the table." In a matter-of-fact tone he added: "I am blind."

When he was seated, the detective asked of the chauffeur, in a low tone:

"Saunders, is this the table I asked for?"

"Yes, sir; the nearest table to the door leading from the bar. It's all right, sir."

"All right. Go and have your own lunch now. I want to start off again in about an hour."

Because of his inability to tell by the sense of

touch the denomination of the bills he carried, Gaunt kept them in separate purses, of different sizes, stowed about his pockets, and the indefatigable Miss Barnes sorted them for him each morning on her arrival. Currency, of course, he could tell; but he found it inconvenient to carry much gold about with him.

After Saunders had departed, he produced the purse containing the five-dollar notes, and handed one to the head waiter, who was still hovering about.

"Look here, my man," he said. "Did you know Mr. Garret Appleton by sight? Was he a frequent customer here? You need not be afraid to talk to me—I am not a reporter."

The head waiter's fingers closed eagerly over the bill.

"Yes, sir, I knew him very well, sir. I've heard of his—his murder, of course. He was up here just the day before."

"It's about that last trip of his that I want to ask you some questions. I'm a friend of the family. I understand he didn't lunch here, but went out again almost immediately after arriving, and walked over the fields to that patch of woods." He waved his hand vaguely toward the left.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see him when he returned?"

"Yes, sir."

"He was accompanied by two men, wasn't he—one short and one tall?"

"Yes; but only as far as the edge of the field, sir. Then he left them, and came back here to the inn; had a quick bite, and went off in his car."

"It's too bad that you didn't get a close-enough view of those two men to give me a description of them."

"But I did, sir. You see, they only went back to the woods. They couldn't have gone far, and they must have been watching; for, directly Mr. Appleton's car was out of sight, they came around by way of the lane—I could swear it was the same two, sir—and sat down just two tables away from where you are sitting now, and ordered a drink. One was short and quite stout—that was the old one. He might have been about forty-five, or fifty; but you can't tell exactly, because he was pale and sallow, and looked as if he'd had a long illness, or—or—"

"Go on, my man, there is five dollars more in it for you, if you'll tell me everything. What were you going to say then?"

"Well, of course I don't know who he was, sir, and I haven't any right to speak of it, but, well, I took on a waiter here, once, who had that same queer pallor, and his hair was cropped close. After he'd been here two days, he disappeared with all the hotel silverware he could carry off, and I found out he was an old offender, just out from a long term in prison.

"That stout little man, here Monday afternoon,

had the same gray look on his face, although he was mostly bald, and what little hair he had was shaved quite close. It came over me all of a sudden that he might be a jail-bird, too; but I could have kicked myself for a fool, afterward, for he—he tipped handsomely, and seemed quite a gentleman. I've heard, sir, that when a prisoner's term is nearly up, they let his hair grow for a while beforehand; but my convict waiter had been pardoned on short notice—and maybe if this gentleman had been in prison, too, he might have gotten out unexpected, the same way."

"And the younger man—what about him?"

"Oh, he was in his twenties, I should say. A dark young man, and tanned as if he'd been out in the open air a lot. They looked alike, for all their difference in size and build; and they must have been father and son, for I heard him call the old man 'Dad.'"

"Did you ever see them before?"

"No, sir." The man hesitated again. "I can't say positive that I have, but the older gentleman's face seemed sort of familiar. Maybe I'd seen him a long while ago, somewhere, and he's changed a lot. I have a good memory for faces—a head waiter's got to have—and I've been working around New York these thirty years."

"Did they stay long?"

"A little short of an hour, sir."

"What did they order?"

"Nothing to eat; just drinks—a champagne cup for the older gentleman, and plain ginger ale for the younger."

"That is all. You may get my luncheon now. I'm in a hurry to be off. . . . But wait a minute. How did you hurt your hand?"

"Cut it badly, sir, carving the other night, when I was in a hurry, and we had a big rush. But how did you—"

"When you placed the silver before me, you used your left hand, and that clumsily, as if you were unaccustomed to it."

There was the noise and bustle about them of arriving lunch parties, and the head waiter seemed anxious to be about his duties; so Gaunt slipped into the ready hand the other promised bill, and said in a low tone:

"Send the waiter to me for my luncheon order now, and be sure it is the same one who waited on those two gentlemen, on Monday afternoon."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir;" and the head waiter departed.

After a few moments, there was a deferential cough beside Gaunt, and a voice said:

"I am the waiter you wanted, sir. Shall I read the menu to you?"

Evidently, the head waiter had told him of his patron's affliction.

"Yes; take my order, and then come back."

Gaunt indicated a simple luncheon; then, when the waiter returned, said:

“What’s your name?”

“Henry, sir.”

“Well, Henry, there is a good tip in it for you, if you’ll answer my questions. You waited on two gentlemen, Monday afternoon, about—well, we’ll say about four o’clock, or a little after. You served them champagne cup and ginger ale. Do you remember them?”

“Yes, sir; quite well, sir.”

“Did you overhear anything they said to each other?”

“Only a little, sir. They seemed very excited and pleased about something—quite as if they were celebrating. But they were mostly quiet when I came around the table, and acted cautious; for, after the older gentleman had had his first pint of wine, and I was bringing them the second, he was talking quite loud, and the younger hushed him up. All I heard was the stout little man say; ‘Well, I guess we’ve got him where we want him, Rupert. He will come across all right. Smith has flown, damn him!—I beg you pardon, sir—‘Smith has flown; but Appleton was the main one I meant to get after, any way.’ That is all, sir. They didn’t stay long after that. The little, stout man paid the bill, and gave me a very good tip, and then they went away, walking off around by the lane.”

"Would you know them again, if you saw them?"

"Yes, sir."

"They'd never been in here before, either of them?"

"Not that I know of, sir. I don't think I waited on them, if they were. But sometimes we have an awful rush, especially in the spring and summer."

"You've been here long?"

"Going on three years, sir."

"That is all, Henry. You may get my luncheon now."

After eating a hasty meal, and bestowing upon the waiter his promised tip, Gaunt entered his car, and told Saunders to drive down the lane, past the clump of woodland, until he came to a small farm-house.

In a very few minutes they stopped, and Saunders led the detective through the gate, and up a trim little path to the door, upon which he rapped smartly.

Shuffling steps were heard within; then the door creaked, and a woman's aged, quavering voice asked their business.

"You are Mrs. Crabtree?"

"Yes, sir." The woman's accent held a strong hint of the South of England.

"Where is your husband? I want to speak to him."

"In the garden, bringing in the pumpkins. If 'e'll sit 'e doon 'ere, sir, I will go fetch 'im for 'e."

Gaunt seated himself in the chair she offered, and Saunders started back to his machine; but the detective bade him sit on the steps of the little porch, within a few feet of the opened door.

Presently the shuffling feet were heard returning upon the stony little path, accompanied by a stronger, firmer tread, and a man's voice, old, but more vigorous than the woman's had been, sounded upon his ears.

"I am Albert Crabtree, sir. 'E wished for to see me?"

"Yes, Crabtree; I want your record. Oh, you needn't be afraid of me; I am not a police officer, and I will pay you well. How long have you lived here?"

The old man hesitated, and, in spite of Gaunt's reassurance, his voice took on a note of fear.

"My record's a clean one, sir. I'm afeered to have no man know it."

"I'm sure of that, Crabtree. You're English, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir; we're in this country sixteen years, or more, Lisbeth an' me."

"How long have you lived in this house?"

"Goin' on four years, sir."

Going on four years! The same length of time the couple named Smith had lived in the old Jersey farm-house!

"Before that you were where?"

"In New York, sir."

"What did you do? Had you a trade?"

"No, sir."

The old man seemed to hesitate, and the detective asked again:

"What did you do?"

"I was a—a coachman, sir."

"Any your wife?"

There was a touch of pride in the old man's voice as he answered:

"Lizbeth ben't ever in service since we was married."

"For whom were you coachman, Crabtree?"

"When we fust coom over? For the Clintons, on Washington Square."

"And then for whom?"

There was no answer, and the old man's feet shuffled uneasily on the porch.

After a long minute, the old woman's quavering voice cried out:

"Why don't 'e answer, Albert, my man? We've nowt to be ashamed of, and 'e was a kind master always."

"'Twas Mr.—Mr. Hitchcock, sir."

Something in the man's voice, no less than his hesitation, made the detective ask quickly:

"What Mr. Hitchcock?"

"Mr. Rupert Hitchcock, sir."

An illuminating ray of thought flashed over Gaunt's mind.

"Not Rupert Hitchcock, of Smith, Hitchcock & Gregory?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, and as Lisbeth says, 'There is nought to be ashamed of in that.' For, whatever they said he did, he was a kind gentleman."

"Well, Crabtree, I would like to speak to him. Will you tell him so, please?"

The old wife gave a little, sharp cry, and the man replied uneasily:

"Tell 'im, sir! 'Ow can I tell 'im, sir? I don't know where 'e is."

"Oh, yes, you do. He is here in your house, with his son Rupert, Junior."

"Indeed, an' 'e isn't, sir! Mr. Hitchcock ben't 'ere."

"He was here Monday afternoon. A gentleman called on him, and the three walked away together, and Mr. Hitchcock and his son didn't return until after five."

After a pause, the old woman said tremblingly:

"'E better tell the gentleman, Albert. 'E knows, anyway."

"Well, sir, it can't do Mr. Hitchcock any harm. 'E an' Master Rupert came late Sunday night, an' stayed wi' us till Monday night, and the gentleman came in the afternoon, just as 'e said."

"Did you expect them Sunday?"

"No, they just dropped from the clouds, like, and asked if we would put them up for a day. They'd been good to Lisbeth an' me, before—

before Mr. Hitchcock's trouble, sir; an' we was only too glad to do anything we could."

"At what time did they leave on Monday night?"

"As soon as it was dark, sir. A fine, big motor car came for them, and took them away."

"Did Mr. Hitchcock say anything about seeing you again?"

"Only that—'e'd see us sometime, sir, and 'e gave me twenty dollars, and shook hands wi' us both."

The detective rose.

"You can crank up now, Saunders" he said, "and we'll be off."

Turning to the old man, he held out a bill of the same denomination as those he had tendered the head waiter at the inn.

Albert Crabtree took it, but in rather a doubtful manner, and said hesitatingly:

"I wouldn't want to take it, sir, if I—I'd been 'urting Mr. Hitchcock by what I have told 'e."

"You haven't, Crabtree. You see, I knew it all the time. Nothing can harm Mr. Hitchcock, now; he is as free as any of us."

The old woman, divining Gaunt's affliction, guided him down the path. Half-way to the car, she allowed a slight groan to escape her, and he turned sympathetically to her.

"Has it been very bad, this winter?"

She looked at him, startled.

"What, sir? My rheumatism you mean? It

'as been bad; but one must expect things when one gets on in years. 'Tis in my left leg, sir."

"Yes, I heard you drag your left foot a little. That was why I asked. I hope it will be better. . . . Good-day, Mrs. Crabtree."

In the car, as he rolled swiftly cityward, the amazing revelations of the afternoon pounded unceasingly in Gaunt's brain. Rupert Hitchcock! The man who had wrecked the powerful Wall Street firm of Smith, Hitchcock V. Gregory, of which he was junior partner, and who had been sentenced to seven years in prison for the misappropriation of funds!

What connection had there been between him and the murdered man? What secret had they shared, what mystery guarded? By some strange stroke of fate, could it be from his hand that the bullet had sped to the heart of Garret Appleton?

CHAPTER XII

DEVIOUS WAYS

THE night's reflections served to alter Gaunt's plans for the next day, and, at as early an hour as he conventionally could, he stepped from his motor at the door of the Blenheim, and was guided to Mrs. Finlay Appleton's apartments. That lady, mindful that his affliction prevented a betrayal of her early-morning appearance, received him without delay, and all but inundated him under a storm of anxious queries. When the eager flow of questioning had abated somewhat, the detective ventured to speak:

"Please, please, my dear Mrs. Appleton! You must believe that I appreciate, in part at least, your feeling as a mother, in so heartrending an affair as this, and I am doing my utmost to shorten the suspense and horror of the situation for you; but you really must have patience. Remember that the picked men of the detective squad of the police force are working night and day, also, on this case, and, although many clues have been unearthed, it is too soon to expect anything definite. Such an affair as this cannot be brought to a conclusion in a day."

"I most heartily wish it were not necessary for

the police to be concerned—at least, until the man who killed my poor boy is caught!” returned the elderly lady, asperity struggling with grief in her tones. “That Inspector person—Hanrahan, I believe his name is—called upon me yesterday afternoon, and asked me the most preposterous and unbelievably impertinent questions about Garret—quite as if he suspected him of having some disgraceful secret in his past! As if my son could have any secret from his mother! The man’s impudence was astounding, and I told him so, and soon sent him about his business!”

The detective’s face relaxed ever so slightly. He could imagine the result of Inspector Hanrahan’s impolite visit.

“It was a terrible experience, Mr. Gaunt; absolute torture, coming, as it did, immediately after my poor son’s burial!”

“I read of the funeral in the papers, this morning,” the detective remarked.

“It was terrible—terrible!” she cried. “My husband would have turned in his grave, had he known! The horrible crowds, Mr. Gaunt—the horrible, gaping, staring crowds! In spite of the cordons of police, they pressed in upon us on all sides, turning our grief into a sort of hideous public holiday! The last service which could be rendered my poor boy was robbed of all solemnity, all sacredness, by that mob of morbid, heartlessly curious people.”

"Indeed, you have my sympathy, Mrs. Appleton. I wish with all my heart that you and yours could have been spared that; but it is inevitably a part of such a tragedy as this. I am sure the police did all in their power to protect you—"

"Perhaps they did. But, as to discovering the murderer of my son, I have no faith in them. Yates and I rely entirely upon you."

"I trust that I shall not disappoint you. But, Mrs. Appleton, I did not come here to distress or annoy you, I assure you. A little matter has turned up, which I should like some information about. Mr. Garret Appleton's fortune was not entirely in real estate, was it?"

"No," she replied, in evident surprise. "He held stocks and bonds, and traded quite a little in them, I believe."

"Can you tell me who his brokers were?"

"Palmer and Leach, on Broad Street."

"Have they been his brokers for a long time?"

Mrs. Appleton paused, as if trying to recall to her memory that which he had asked of her; but he detected a slight quickening of her audible breathing, and the dry rustle of her hands stirring in the silken lap of her morning-robe.

"Really, I don't remember, exactly. For a year or two prior to his marriage, I think."

"And, before that, who were his brokers?" The nervous, annoyed stirring became more apparent in the stillness of the room. "Was the firm, by any

chance, Smith, Hitchcock V. Gregory?" he persisted.

"I—I believe it was!" came faintly from the thin, compressed lips.

"Ah! A most unfortunate failure!" commented the detective. "I remember my secretary reading of it to me, at the time. There were only two members of the firm, were there not—only the man Smith, and Rupert Hitchcock? If my memory serves me, the name Gregory was merely retained to keep the title of the firm intact. I believe Mr. Gregory died many years ago."

"Really, I cannot say," murmured Mrs. Appleton, somewhat coldly. "I remember something about a failure, of course; but I know very little of affairs of finance."

"I trust your son didn't lose by it," the detective remarked, and paused for a moment before continuing. "It was one of the worst failures the Street has ever known, and hundreds went down in the crash."

"My son was a very astute business man, Mr. Gaunt, and a very reticent one. If he lost very much in the failure of the firm with whom he traded, he said nothing of it, to me at least. He seldom discussed business matters at home." Her tone was flatly uninterested, and there was a note of finality in it, which Gaunt recognized.

He rose.

"Palmer and Leach, I think you said, were the

names of the latest brokers with whom Mr. Appleton traded? Thank you very much. I will remember it. . . . Good-morning. I will report to you as soon as anything definite is discovered."

Mrs. Appleton gave him a limp handshake, and he departed, returning at once to his rooms, where he found Miss Barnes awaiting him. As Jenkins relieved him of his coat and hat, he asked his secretary to get him a number on the telephone. It was that of a man, although not a financier himself, who was probably the most cordially detested and feared of any man connected with Wall Street. Purporting to be the editor of a so-called financial news-sheet, Jerome Wetmore was in reality a spy, who managed in some seemingly inexplicable manner to become possessed of the secret plans and operations of the biggest men on the Exchange, and who used them for his own private ends, in a subtle way, which succeeded in keeping him out of the hands of the police, or shared them with others, at a price. No one knew the extent of his resources, or the number or identity of his hirelings in the offices of different magnates; but that they existed was undoubted. On whatever questionable enterprise he was engaged, however, one thing was certain. The man was a walking chronology of events in the financial world, and as such he had not infrequently been of use to Gaunt.

"Hello, Mr. Wetmore! This is Gaunt—Damon Gaunt," the detective announced. "Have you a

few minutes to spare for me? I want some information."

"Surest thing you know!" came in short, quick accents over the 'phone. "Always time for you, Gaunt. What is it?"

"Can you reply freely, without fear of being overheard—mention names if necessary?" Gaunt asked, cautiously.

There was a chuckle at the other end of the wire.

"I should—hope so! This office is a padded cell. If it weren't, I might have been a fit subject for you, long ago!" Mr. Wetmore returned, frankly. Then he added: "What can I do for you?"

"Tell me all you can of the Smith, Hitchcock V. Gregory failure, four years ago."

A low whistle sounded in the detective's ear.

"Now you're talkin'! Whatever started you on that? Wait a minute—hold the wire."

There was a faint resounding jar, as of the receiver being hastily thumped down upon the desk, and then silence, while the detective waited patiently. At length, when several minutes had passed, he heard the voice of his informant again:

"You there, Gaunt?"

"Yes."

"I looked it up, to be sure of the facts. There wasn't any Gregory in the firm; only Smith and Hitchcock. Gregory'd been dead fifteen years. They failed four years ago next January, on the

twenty-seventh, for seventeen hundred thousand dollars, in round figures. Only four hundred thousand was recovered, or could be accounted for. Smith showed a clean sheet. He'd been a very sick man, and had traveled in Europe for eight months prior to the failure, leaving everything in his partner's hands, and the books of the firm were straight as a string up to his departure. Of course, he was technically guilty with his partner, Hitchcock, of the misappropriation of funds, and all that; but he came home at once when the failure was announced, and made what restitution he could. He and his wife put every dollar they had in the world into the hands of the receivers—country place, town house, automobiles, his wife's jewels, even her heirlooms, wedding-presents, and her own little private fortune, which she'd had before they were married. In view of that, and the fact that the doctor and nurses, who'd traveled with him, testified that he'd been permitted, because of the state of his health, to receive no business letters or cables while in Europe, not even to glance at a newspaper, his lawyers got him off in some way—released on his own recognizance, or something like that. Clever lawyers he had, Reilly and Fitzhugh. I guess his physical condition had something to do with it, too—he wouldn't have lasted two months behind bars. A lot of sympathy was expressed for him. A man can't start life over again at his age, with death star-

ing him in the face, and not a cent to fall back on."

He paused, and a faint rustle of papers sounded in the detective's ears, as if Mr. Wetmore was looking up fresh data.

"Do you know what became of him?" Gaunt asked.

"Can't say positively. He dropped out of sight; but I heard somewhere that his friends helped him temporarily. The police must have kept track of him, to see if by any chance he unearthed any of that million, or more, that disappeared at the time of the failure. But I guess he was straight enough; for, the last I heard, he and his wife were living in sheer poverty, somewhere in Jersey. So much for him. You know, yourself, about the other one, Hitchcock, don't you?"

"Convicted and sent to prison, wasn't he?" The detective's voice was a triumph of studied carelessness.

"Yes, for seven years. But I read in the paper the other day that he'd been pardoned, because of his health. Haven't heard anything of him, though. 'Tisn't likely he'd show up down here, any way. I've got a list here of their biggest customers: Bender, Matthews, Samuelson, Houck—I'll send it up to you."

"Thanks, I wish you would." Gaunt prepared to add a phrase in pursuance of his line of thought, when a yell of amazement over the wire cut him short.

"Say! Look here! That chap who was murdered the other day, Garret Appleton, was one of their heaviest traders! What do you know about that?" And then, before the detective could speak, Wetmore added, in mounting excitement: "I read in the papers that you were on that case, Gaunt! I believe that's why you called me up! What's the connection, anyway? By Gad! anything to do with Hitchcock getting out of Sing Sing just at the same time? What the dev—"

"No—no!" Gaunt laughed easily. "You're way off, Mr. Wetmore. It's true enough that I'm handling the Appleton affair—or trying to—but I've got a lot more on hand, besides. Some of them are civil cases—financial, you know. I wanted the inside details of the Smith, Hitchcock V. Gregory failure purely as a side issue on one of them. By the way, did you know either of the two remaining partners?"

"Knew 'em both—Smith better than Hitchcock, though."

"What was Hitchcock like?"

"Little, fat man, about forty-five; dressed like a sport; high liver, good fellow—you know the type. Widower with one son at college, when the crash came."

"And Smith?"

"Oh, Smith was just the opposite. Tall and grave and dignified; no sport at all; director in a lot of banks, vestryman of the church—that

sort. He had a funny walk, come to think of it. Dragged one foot behind him—hurt in a runaway accident, I believe.”

“What was his full name? Oh, but, of course, I can look that up. I needn’t take any more of your time, Mr. Wetmore.”

“That’s all right; I know it like my own. It was James Arbuckle Smith.”

“Thanks very much. I’m glad you could give me the details. It’s saved me a lot of time; although I’m afraid it’s taken yours. . . . By the way, Mr. Wetmore, why don’t you have that office clock of yours fixed?”

“Clock! What’s the matter with it?”

“I just heard it strike eleven, and it isn’t a quarter of the hour yet, for my own clock here on the mantel always whirs at the quarters.”

“You’re too sharp for me, Gaunt. I’m glad you’re not working on a case against me. Let me know when you are going to start investigating me, and I’ll take to the woods.”

Both men laughed, and Gaunt called:

“Well, don’t forget to send me that list of the firm’s customers. . . . Good-by.” And he resolutely hung up the receiver.

“Miss Barnes,” he continued, turning to his secretary, “there’s a pile of letters there—nothing important, I think; but you’d better answer them today, please. I’ve got to take a run out in the country.”

He pressed the bell, and, when Jenkins appeared, asked:

"Is Saunders waiting outside with the car?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get my coat and hat, and tell the cook to put up a lunch for Saunders and me, with hot coffee in the vacuum bottle, right away."

In a few moments, the simple preparations were made, and they started down-town, headed for the Battery and the Staten Island Ferry. Gaunt wished to take the same route as Garret Appleton had, in his nocturnal visit of three weeks before, to that little farm-house near New Brunswick. Saunders knew the roads well, and they skimmed through Staten Island, then over the ferry to Perth Amboy. Out in the real country once more, they paused by the roadside, master and man, and ate their luncheon together with great satisfaction. Then on again, until they passed through the sleepy little village of Metuchen and beyond its farther outskirts.

"Go on about a quarter of a mile, then stop at the first house, and ask if the people within know where the Smiths lived—the James A. Smiths. If they can't tell you, drive on another quarter of a mile, and ask again. Keep on asking until you find someone who can tell you. Then go there."

"Very good, sir."

From the third house, Saunders emerged triumphant.

"It's a half-mile down the road, sir; the fifth house from here on the left?"

"All right. Go ahead."

Saunders drove slowly, and finally brought the car to a stop.

"Well, sir," he said, rather doubtfully, "I'm sure this is the house the man told me. I counted straight, coming along. But it can't be, because it's all closed up, and looks deserted."

"That is the house, I think. What is on each side of it?"

"Corn-field on the left, and a big white farmhouse, with red barns and stables set away back from the road, on the right. 'Cross the way, nothin' but cow-pasture an' fields, where rows of somethin' green's been growin', as far as you can see." Saunders' lack of enthusiasm over a bucolic existence was evidenced by the tone in which he delivered his description.

"What is the farm-house like—the one right here, which is closed up, I mean?"

"It's awful little, but real cozy-lookin'," Saunders remarked critically, surveying it. "The yard is full of flowers, and the house has been repainted lately. There's a little bit of a stable, back—you could hardly get the car in it—and a vegetable garden and two hen-houses. That's about all."

"Drive up to the big farm, now; the one with the red barns."

Saunders obeyed, and they were greeted at the

door by a stout, good-natured woman, who vigorously silenced the dogs' clamor by assailing them with the broom.

"The men-folks is all out in the fields, gittin' in the pumpkins an' winter beets. We're reel late with it; but we've been dretful short-handed this fall, an' thank goodness there ain't be'n what you might call an honest frost, yet!" she rattled off, volubly. Then drawing a fresh breath, she asked: "Who air you wantin' to see?"

"The owner of that little farm-house down there," Gaunt replied, pointing vaguely in the direction from which they had come.

"Silas owns it—my husband. I'm Mrs. Horner. Won't you git out, an' set awhile?" The good woman bustled about, setting chairs on the little porch, and emitting an uninterrupted flow of words as she did so. "I'm reel sorry about the house; but we can't let it. 'Twouldn't be right. The folks that had it have got a lease on it, all paid up in advance for some months to come, an', though they've gone away, they may come back, any time. They've left all their furniture in it, an' put lots of improvements besides."

Saunders helped his employer from the machine, and guided him to a chair; then, turning to the woman, he laid his hands across his eyes for a moment, significantly. She nodded in quick, compassionate comprehension, and disappeared suddenly into the house, to reappear almost at once

with a tray, on which were two glasses and a brimming pitcher of buttermilk.

"Thought you might be thirsty after your ride," she remarked hospitably, as she poured out a glassful, and thrust it into Gaunt's hand, then turned with the tray to the grinning Saunders.

"You look 's if you'd come a good ways. I was out in one of them sky-hootin' things once—but not any more! We went over a thank-you-ma'am the driver wasn't expectin'—we bounced right up in the air! Silas came down on his thumb, an' sprained it, an' I bit my tongue clear through. . . . But about the house—"

"This buttermilk is delicious," remarked Gaunt, who loathed it. "It was kind of you to think of it, Mrs. Horner."

"I just made butter this mornin'," she remarked. "But my cows ain't doin' so well this fall—"

"About the house," the detective interrupted, doggedly. "A man and his wife named Smith lived there, didn't they?"

"Yes. I declare you're the third party in three days that's been here askin' about them Smiths! It's them you want to know about, an' not the house, a-tall!"

"It is, Mrs. Horner," Gaunt acknowledged frankly, with his winning smile. "My interest in them is a friendly one. I think I knew them years ago, and I wanted to find them again. Was the name James A. Smith?"

"Them's the very people, I expect!" she exclaimed, her risen suspicious quelled, as much by his manner as his words.

"Was Mr. Smith tall and thin, and did he walk a little lame, sort of dragging one foot behind him?" the detective continued.

Mrs. Horner nodded vigorously.

"That's him! An' Mis' Smith was kinder sickly, an' wore a false front that a child could see through."

- "Yes, yes!" Gaunt cried hastily, while Saunders turned respectfully away, and began to examine his tires with a great show of interest, his shoulders shaking. "They are the people I am looking for. I can't imagine why they went away, or where."

"No more can Silas an' me," returned the hostess. "Goin' off sudden like that, an' leavin' no address—though, to be sure, they didn't have no mail once in a dog's age. We didn't know they was thinkin' of it till the day before they left, when Mr. Smith come up and asked Silas 'bout a wagon to take them an' their trunks to the station. When I went down to take her the even's milk—they bought eggs an' milk an' butter an' chickens from us, an' hams an' sausage-meat in the fall—I asked Mis' Smith where they was goin' an' when they'd be home again, an' all she said was: 'We've been called away suddenly. I don't know yet when we'll be back.' Their trunks was checked through to New York, Silas says, an' all the way to the station Mis' Smith kep' worryin' 'bout

missin' the train, an' her husband tryin' to quiet her. 'We ought to have started earlier,' Silas says she kep' sayin'. 'You know, James, what's at stake! If we don't catch this train, we may miss the steamer. So I guess they was goin' somewheres by boat from New York, most likely.'

"When did they leave?" Gaunt asked.

"Two weeks ago last Wednesday, on the eight o'clock train."

"It seems strange," the detective commented. "How long have they been living here? I lost track of them a good while ago."

"Goin' on four years."

"Did they have many visitors?"

"No. Mis' Smith's two sisters came out from the city once in a great while, an' twice in the last few months, a man come out in a big automobile, like your'n, to see Mr. Smith."

"When was the last time he came?"

"Just a week before they left. I guess they was city folks themselves, afore they come out here; for they didn't know much about the country, leastways livin' like this. Seems 's if they must 've been reel wealthy, an' lost their money; for Mis' Smith didn't know a thing about housework, an' never could learn, no more than Mr. Smith could do gardenin'. My niece, Ellen Louise—that's over to Trenton now, takin' a course in a business college—used to run down every day, an' clean up, an' cook their dinner for 'em, an'

they had one of Silas's hired hands twice a week to look after their vegetable garden. Mis' Smith learned, though, to tend her flowers reel nice, an' she loved 'em."

"You love them, too, don't you, Mrs. Horner? But let me tell you that your phlox would be hardier if you would plant a purple and white together in one clump, instead of separating it with dahlias and asters."

"Good land!" Mrs. Horner pushed back her chair, and stared at him. "I—I thought—"

"And your path is bordered with them. I could not help smelling them as I came up from my car. . . . But tell me, Mrs. Horner, you say the Smith's put improvements in the house?"

"Yes. For all they lived so simple an' plain, just like us, they seemed to hev money to spend on anything they wanted. They put a bath-room in when they first come, an' a little engine in the cellar to pump water up to the tank, an' enlarged the porch. Las' spring they painted the house. Mis' Smith had a lovely pianner, an' she played beautiful, an' they had more books than a body could read in a life time. They bought a horse an' rig, too; but they sold it back to Jed Williamson, three days before they left. We might 'a' knowed from that they was goin' away! They was queer in some ways, too; never went to church, or mixed-up in village doin's, but jus' kep' by themselves. Mis' Smith wasn't satis-

fied, either. Ellen Louise says she was always complainin' to Mr. Smith."

"Complaining? About what?" asked the detective.

"About the way they was livin'. Seems 's if they was waitin' for somethin'. Mis' Smith used to say, 'The time seemed so long, an' 'Would it ever end?' an' 'Was it worth it?' Mr. Smith was reel patient with her, Ellen Louise says. He'd say they had to lie low, an' did she want to see him in somebody's shoes?—Ellen Louise couldn't catch the name—an' it wouldn't be long now, before everythin' would be all right. . . . Queer, ain't it?"

"It certainly is. I cannot understand it," Gaunt replied, mendaciously. He rose as he spoke. "Well, Mrs. Horner, I must be getting back to the city. I'm sorry not to have seen—James. When they come back, tell them that Mr. Baylis—John Baylis—was here, won't you? And thank you for your hospitality."

The dogs had gathered about the car, and were vociferating their enthusiastic farewells.

"You have three large dogs and one small one, haven't you, Mrs. Horner? I should think that great Dane would make a mouthful of the pup."

"No, they get on reel well. But how in creation you know, Mr. Baylis, beats me."

"I can tell very easily by their bark, Mrs. Horner. Did you ever notice that the smaller the dog is,

the more high-keyed are its tones? I can tell most breeds of dogs by their bark—not only their tones, but their manner of barking; yapping, or baying, or deep growls or little, sharp, hysterical snaps. All except mongrels, of course. . . . Well, good-day, Mrs. Horner.”

“Good-day, Mr. Baylis. You’ll come back when the Smiths do?”

“Yes, yes,” Gaunt answered, with a slight smile, “I will come back when the Smiths do.”

Saunders had already cranked up the car, and now assisted Gaunt to it, while Mrs. Horner followed them, with cordial invitations to return.

On the way home, Gaunt thought: “I must have Miss Barnes look up the steamers, and see which ones left on Wednesday, a fortnight ago, at noon or after, and their destination. . . . So, that end of the string finishes in—a knot!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE END OF A FALSE SCENT

THE *SULTANIC* sailed at noon on the ninth, for Plymouth, Cherbourg, and Southampton; the *Prinzessin Clotilde*, at three in the afternoon for the Mediterranean; the *Saxonia* for Panama, the West Indies, and South America, at four," Miss Barnes announced, in precise tones, the next morning.

"Humph!" Gaunt remarked. "They know Europe best; but they'd scarcely dare England or France, just yet. The Mediterranean—Algiers—Miss Barnes, please call up the South German Lloyd Line, and get the ticket-agent on the wire. There's a chance, of course, that they bought their tickets through an agency; but their names would be on the private record, if not on the published passenger-list, even if they purchased their tickets at the very last moment, which doesn't seem likely, from Mrs. Smith's remarks on the way to the station. If I cannot get a positive description of them, I must wait until the *Prinzessin Clotilde* docks here again."

He was in the habit of thinking aloud to Miss

Barnes, who went composedly about her business, and evidenced not the slightest inclination of having heard, or paid any attention. Now, she put the receiver down upon the desk at his hand.

"There you are, Mr. Gaunt. The ticket-agent is on the wire."

"I should like to know, please, if a man and his wife sailed on the *Prinzessin Clotilde*, two weeks ago last Wednesday, whose initials were J. A. S."

"Just a moment, please."

A pause; and then the same voice came over the wire:

"No, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly sure. The sailing-list was small. It's early yet for the rush to the southern part of Europe, and not a ticket was sold too late to get the name on the published list."

"Thank you. . . . Good-by."

Gaunt proceeded to call up the Blue Star Line, and got the ticket-agent, to whom he put the same question.

This time the answer was a different one:

"Yes, sir. Judson A. Smiley and wife sailed on the *Saxonia*, on the ninth, for Cayenne, French Guiana, first class."

"Thank you. There are the people I was looking, for I think; but I should like to be sure. Did

you, by any chance, sell them their tickets? But, of course, you would scarcely remember."

"Oh, I remember them all right. Mr. Smiley wrote from New Brunswick, New Jersey, inclosing the money for the tickets in bills, not a check, or money-order. I remember particularly, because he told me to send no reply, that they would call for the tickets the morning of the day the steamer sailed. And they did, too, about noon. An oldish couple, and the man limped. Think they're your friends?"

"I'm sure of it. Thank you. . . . Good-by."

French Guiana! Somewhere, in one of the few remaining non-extradition states of Central America, the couple were hiding themselves with part of the money Smith had managed, somehow, to get his hands on at the time of the failure. Even though Mrs. Smith connived at her husband's guilt, even though she was a sharer in the profits accruing from his treachery, the detective pitied her.

She had been discontented in her quiet, modest home in America. What was in store for her in her future life among the outcasts of civilization? Their previous intention was plain to him. They had fancied themselves safe for seven years, while the partner, who had been the scapegoat, was in prison. They knew he would not speak, that he expected to share the plunder on his release. Their

intention had been to live quietly, in ostentatious poverty, within easy reach of the law, until all suspicion that they had received any share of the lost seventeen hundred thousand dollars was past and the whole affair forgotten. Then they had meant to go quietly to Europe, and live out the remainder of their lives in peace and plenty.

But the unexpected and premature pardon of Hitchcock had upset their well-planned scheme, and they had been forced to flee the country. Hitchcock himself had served his time. He had nothing more to fear from the world, and, when he found that he had been swindled out of his share of the proceeds of the fraudulent transaction, he would inevitably have revenged himself upon his partner, who had been equally guilty, by betraying him.

The detective was beginning to see to the end of this branch of his investigation. That the Smiths had in their possession only a part of the money never accounted for, he felt convinced, and he felt equally sure that he knew who it was that had held the greater portion within his grasp.

Gaunt reached his rooms in New York, late in the afternoon, and proceeded at once to call up the district attorney, who was, fortunately, an old friend and confrère of his.

"I say, I want to know something. My secretary read an article in the newspaper the other day, which rather interested me. I am on a pri-

vate case, which goes back indirectly to that Smith, Hitchcock V. Gregory crash, in Wall Street, four years ago. I hear that Hitchcock was pardoned, last week, and is now at liberty."

"Not pardoned, Gaunt, paroled."

"Oh, then of course, you know where he is?"

"Oh, it's no secret. Only, I suppose the poor devil wouldn't want the papers to find out his whereabouts just yet, and send a horde of reporters to worry him. In anticipation of his release, his son brought a small place down near Hempstead, Long Island, and took his father there at once."

"And he is there now?" Gaunt asked, and smiled rather grimly at the district attorney's reply.

"Of course. He hasn't left there since he was released, a week ago. I guess he is only too glad of a chance to hide for awhile, and rest until he can get his nerve back."

"All right. Thanks, old man. . . . Good-by."

He turned to Miss Burns.

"Will you please call up information, and ask if Rupert Hitchcock, Junior, has a telephone, and, if so, put me on the wire."

There was a few minutes' pause, and then Miss Barnes announced:

"Central says they have a telephone; but they don't answer."

"Ask her to keep ringing them, please."

A long twenty minutes ensued, and still there was no reply. At last, Miss Barnes said:

"Central says they don't want to answer—that they have taken the receiver off the hook and left the 'phone open."

Gaunt sighed. He had had enough of motor-ing for that day, and his sightless eyes pained from the sting of the wind, mild as it had been; but there was no help for it.

"Please telephone for Saunders; I'll have to use him again."

Once more they proceeded down-town, at a fast clip, got another ferry—this time to Long Island—and were soon speeding out on the turn-pike. The early autumn darkness had long since fallen, and it was with some difficulty, and after several inquiries, that they found the house which they sought—a modest dwelling, set well back from the street, behind a clump of screening elms.

Saunders guided the detective up the steps, and, after repeated and insistent ringing at the bell, the door was at length opened an inch or two, and a man's voice—a young voice—asked cautiously:

"What is it you wish?"

"I am Mr. Gaunt—Damon Gaunt. If I am right in thinking that I am speaking to the son of Rupert Hitchcock, please tell him that I should like to see him, for a moment."

"I am sorry—that will be impossible—"

And the door began to close. Gaunt heard it creak, and put his hand against the casing.

"I am absolutely not connected with the newspapers, or police department. I have news for your father, which I am sure will be of great interest to him, and I may be able to save him much notoriety and some trouble."

There was a pause, and then the voice said:

"Wait just a moment, please."

This time Gaunt allowed the other to close the door very gently, and, after a few minutes, returning steps were heard, and the door opened a little farther.

"Who is that with you, please, Mr. Gaunt?"

"My chauffeur. . . . Saunders, go back and wait in the car."

Saunders retreated, and the young man opened the door wide.

"Come in," he said. "You see, we accept your word that you are not connected with the press. From the police, my father has nothing to fear."

Gaunt hesitated and smiled a little, as he said, simply:

"You will have to guide me, Mr. Hitchcock. I am blind."

"Ah! I did not know, of course. You will pardon me. Come this way.—He led him across a narrow hall, and into a room in which an open

wood fire was burning. Gaunt could hear its cheery crackle, and feel the welcome warmth; for, with nightfall, the weather had sharpened, and the drive out had been an uncomfortably cold one.

Young Mr. Hitchcock pulled a soft leather chair within the detective's reach, saying:

"My father will be with you in a moment." He left the room, and Gaunt seated himself, and held out his hands to the blaze before him. The coming interview might prove to be an extremely difficult one, should the ex-financier prove reticent; but the detective thought that he had hit upon a method of inducing him to open his lips.

Presently, there was the patter of short, rhythmic steps behind him, and a nervously trembling voice asked:

"You are Mr. Gaunt, the detective, are you not? I have heard of you, of course. My son tells me that you have news for me. I am Rupert Hitchcock."

"Yes, Mr. Hitchcock, I have news for you; but it may only be a confirmation of what you already know. I do not know if you have learned that I am investigating the death of Garret Appleton. In the course of my work, I came upon the fact of his conference with you, on Monday afternoon, near the Rocky Point Inn, and so, I am bound to tell you, did the police."

"The police have done their worst to me—the law has taken its pound of flesh! As you must know, Mr. Gaunt, I have nothing to fear from them."

"If you can prove an alibi," the detective suggested, quietly.

The other man started nervously.

"An alibi!" he stammered.

"For the night following your interview—the night of Mr. Appleton's murder."

"Oh, I can do that, of course, if necessary," Rupert Hitchcock replied, eagerly. "I understand from the newspapers that Appleton's—murder—did not occur until after midnight. My son and I were not alone from nine o'clock in the evening until six the following morning. But, you don't mean, Mr. Gaunt, that I am suspected of his murder?"

"Not at all. Should it become necessary, however, it's fortunate that you are so well prepared. . . . Mr. Hitchcock, I know, of course, of the failure of your firm and the manner in which it was brought about from the inside; but I do not know all the details. I am afraid that both Smith and Garret Appleton turned traitors to you."

"They did, curse them—and they are both beyond my reach! Smith has disappeared, and Appleton is dead!"

"Do you know where Smith has gone?"

"No, Mr. Gaunt. I'd give ten years of the rest of my wretched existence to find out."

"He and his wife sailed from New York on the *Saxonia*, of the Blue Star Line, for Cayenne, French Guiana, on the ninth of October last."

"I'll get them!" the other man cried. "I'll get them, if it takes my last cent!"

"But, if they've gone to one of the non-extradition States of Central America—" the detective asked.

"I'll get them!" Rupert Hitchcock repeated, vehemently. "I'll find them wherever they've gone, and drive them to some place where they can be reached."

"But you cannot invoke the aid of the law to return you your share of—let us say—the profits, of your joint transaction."

"No; but I can give him up to justice. I can put him where I was, make him endure the hell I lived through, for four terrible years."

"Think of his wife—" the detective began, gently.

But the other man turned upon him, with long pent-up fury:

"Did he or his wife think of my son, when they made a scapegoat of me, to protect themselves, and robbed me of the money we had saved from the wreck? He's a fine young man, Mr. Gaunt;

no unworthy father ever brought a straighter, cleaner, boy into the world. He was at the university when my trouble came—a brilliant student, popular with his fellows, with a promising career opening before him. Now, his life is wrecked, because of me, and still he does not leave me, or desert me. But, if he had been their son, he would have been held blameless, as they were.”

“How did they succeed in making you the scapegoat, Mr. Hitchcock?” Gaunt asked, suddenly.

“Oh, I don’t mind telling you—I’ll tell the whole world now; I’ve done my time.

“The firm was on its last legs, although nobody knew it, and we were paying dividends out of the principal, the same old game to keep things going awhile longer. To be sure, we still had nearly two million dollars on our hands; but you know what tremendous blocks of stock we carried, how colossal our operations were. That seventeen hundred thousand dollars would be a mere drop in the bucket, when the crash came, and it was coming, inevitably—we couldn’t save ourselves. It wasn’t as if we were a snide curb firm, robbing the widows and orphans and farmers of the few pennies they had gathered together. Our customers were men who could afford to lose. We could not; for we would lose our all.

“We doctored the books for months before Smith

went to Europe, and, somehow, Garret Appleton got onto the fact."

"Yes, he was a customer of yours, wasn't he?"

"Heaviest trader we had. I don't know whether you know it, or not, Mr. Gaunt, but he was insane, actually insane, on the subject of money. He spent it, of course, for appearance's sake; but he hoarded all he could, and gloated over it, like a miser. He would have done anything, gone to any lengths, to increase his capital, simply to have it in his possession.

"When he discovered what we were doing, he offered us an alternative. He would denounce us, or—come in with us. Smith's was the master mind; but he lost his nerve, and faked up that trip to Europe for his health. He taught me how to juggle the books; but, though I had the nerve, I didn't have the brains to carry it through, as we had planned. I was to have half of the profits for allowing myself to be made the scape-goat; but I was assured that, if worse came to the worst, I would only be apprehended on a mere technicality, and soon absolved from all blame or suggestion of double-dealing. But, just about that time, the Socialists got in their work, and there was all that outcry against capitalism and the money trust and the iniquities of high finance, and there wasn't a chance for me.

"Smith egged it on; but I still believed in him,

and went to prison—on his promise to have me quickly released, and to guard my share of the profits of our failure, for me. You know what happened to me, Mr. Gaunt. But, after I was safely out of the way, it was a case of dog eat dog. They were afraid of each other; but Smith had more to fear, since he was a member of the firm, while nothing could be proved on Appleton.

“It stands to reason, therefore, that he mulcted Smith of the greater part of the money. In fact, Appleton admitted as much to my son and me, on Monday afternoon.”

“What occurred, when you were released from prison, Mr. Hitchcock?”

“I went after Smith, of course. It was easy enough to find out where he lived; but I found I was just too late. He had gone. Then, I got after Appleton. I wrote him, telling him where to meet me, and, when he came—cringing, the cur! just as I knew he would—I didn’t try to blackmail him for a cent. I merely told him I was going to expose him, and he voluntarily offered me half of the twelve hundred thousand dollars he had got his hands on. He was to send it to me the next day, and I believe he would have, had he lived. He was too afraid of exposure. He merited death at my hands, God knows, after the way he had treated me! But I would have been the last person in the world, for the sake of my own

interests, to put a bullet in him that night. You can see that for yourself."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Hitchcock. That is plain. . . . I am glad you have been so frank with me, and, if I find I can do anything for you in return, I shall do so. If Police Inspector Hanrahan should call upon you, however, at any time, about that alibi of yours, I advise you, for your own sake, to see him."

"Oh, I don't mind seeing him. He hasn't got any evidence against me, and I can prove where I was every minute of Monday night. . . . Before you go, Mr. Gaunt, I want to thank you. You have done a lot for me—more than you think! You've told me, at least, where to start my search for Jim Smith, and, when I get him where I want him, you'll know it before a letter from me could reach you."

"But you'll not be in a hurry about it, Mr. Hitchcock, will you? You'll want time to get your strength back first. If Jim Smith has gone to a non-extradition country, you may be sure he will stay there for a time, at least, and you must recover your strength, after your long confinement."

"Oh, I will do, all right. I'll never be well, till I get Jim Smith in my clutches. But what made you think there was anything the matter with me?"

"Your step drags peculiarly; you had a stroke while in prison—didn't you?—and you sit all hunched up, with your head bowed over on your chest. I can tell by the constriction of your throat, where your collar compresses it when you speak, and you want to take care of that dry, hacking cough of yours."

"Central America is good for a cough of that sort," Rupert Hitchcock returned, dryly, as he guided the detective to the door. "Good-night, Mr. Gaunt."

Gaunt slept all the way home in the car, and arrived cramped and chilled to the bone. It was late, and he meant to retire at once. But a burly figure was sitting in his chair before the hearth, and the odor of Inspector Hanrahan's favorite brand of tobacco filled the library.

"Where the deuce have you been, Mr. Gaunt? I've been waiting for you since seven o'clock."

"Sorry, Inspector; but I have been out in the country interviewing your two friends."

"My two—what?" asked the mystified Inspector.

"The stout, middle-aged man and the tall, young one, who were talking with Garret Appleton, near the Rocky Point Inn, on Monday afternoon."

"Well, I'm damned!"

The Inspector seated himself again heavily, and

stared at the tall, thin figure slowly divesting himself of his coat.

"I suppose you know who he is?" Gaunt pursued, with quiet amusement.

"That I don't! I've not been able to find the slightest trace of them—nor of those Smiths, in New Jersey, either!"

"Well, if you are going after them, you'd better start soon to catch up with them. They are somewhere in the wilds of Central America, by now."

Gaunt seated himself, filled his pipe, and told the Inspector all that he had learned. The official listened gravely until he had finished; then, after a long pause, he said thoughtfully:

"It's darned funny, how you can get information out of people, Mr. Gaunt. I didn't find out a thing from the waiter, or head waiter, at that inn, nor the old couple back in the woods, either, although I roared at them like a bull."

Gaunt smiled, quietly, to himself.

"Our methods differ, that's all."

"And as for that woman, down in Jersey—that farmer's wife! Good Lord, Mr. Gaunt, she'd talk the legs off an iron pot; but she never says anything! She thought I was a book-agent, came to collect on some of that bunch of books the Smiths had, and she chased me off the place, as if I was a stray dog."

"I understand you called on Mrs. Appleton, Thursday afternoon," the detective remarked, blowing smoke-wreaths in the air. "Did you get any information?"

"By George, that woman's a Tartar!" The Inspector brought his heavy hand down with a resounding thwack on his knee. "She is the worst I ever struck in my life, and I've met some she-devils, in my time! . . . I say, though," he added, as a sudden thought struck him, "you cannot be sure that the J. A. S. on the passenger-list of the *Saxonia* is really James Smith."

"Well, remember, I got a pretty fair description of him, when he called for his tickets at the steamship office, and then it was significant, too, that he called himself Judson A. Smiley. That is a mistake people make when they adopt an alias. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, they will stick to their own initials—heaven alone knows why!"

"Well, I guess, anyway, the ticket-agent's description cinches them. We'll find out when the *Saxonia* docks again, if they really sailed on her. So, that puts the Smiths out of the way. Nevertheless, I think I'll get after that alibi of Rupert Hitchcock's tomorrow."

"Let me know the result, Inspector. I've done you a good turn."

"Sure, I will; I'll be in tomorrow afternoon."

"And—er—going to call on Mrs. Finlay Appleton? You'll probably find her at home."

The Inspector threw up his hands, and departed.

He rose lumberingly to depart; but at the door Gaunt halted him.

"Have you thought of attempting to trace the jewelry that was taken from the body?"

"I've had every office and pawnshop within the limits of greater New York fine-combed; for all trace of them, they might be in the bottom of the sea." The detective shrugged.

"Perhaps they are," he returned, and after the Inspector had taken his departure, Gaunt murmured to himself, that that would be one solution.

CHAPTER XIV

A GLIMMER OF LIGHT

SUNDAY morning was a quiet one for Gaunt. He slept late, after his fatiguing exertions of the previous day, and lingered luxuriously over his after-breakfast smoke. In order to leave no stone unturned, he had perforce followed the clue originally unearthed by Inspector Hanrahan, until he had proved conclusively that it had no connection with the case under investigation; but this had been merely routine work. He must wait patiently until young Mrs. Appleton was able to grant him an interview.

For some days, a faint idea had impressed itself insistently on his subconscious mind, born partly of a flash of his rarely developed intuition, and partly from a curious pause in a conversation, which had taken place there in his own library. It seemed the wildest of assumptions, the most improbable that he had ever allowed himself to entertain, and yet there was damning evidence in his possession, of either one of two facts, and they appeared, on profound reflection, to be equally incredible.

Miss Barnes, unless he urgently needed her, did not come to him on Sundays, and he sat in the library, wistfully fingering the pile of voluminous newspapers until Jenkins, who was hovering anxiously about him—always uneasy when the master was inactive—suggested reading them to him. The man seated himself at a respectful distance, and patiently and laboriously droned out the headlines until Gaunt could endure it no longer, and put an end to it by remarking that he had forgotten a telephone message of importance.

Lifting the receiver from its hook, he called the Appleton house, and, as before, asked for Miss Ellerslie. Her low, sweet voice, vibrating over the wire, thrilled him, as it had ever done, to the very core of his being; but, for the first time, it carried an inexplicable pang to his heart, and the memory of Randolph Force, and their single interview, rose in his mind.

Barbara Ellerslie's voice had lost the note of trembling anxiety, and held a rising gladness and joy, which swept his senses like music, as she told him of her sister's returning strength.

"It seems wonderful, Mr. Gaunt!" she was saying. "My sister is already better than we had dared hope, and all danger to her, of any sort, is over. The doctor is amazed at her strength and recuperative powers, no less than I am. But

there seems to be something preying on her mind—something more than the death of her husband, I mean. She is eager to see you, and the doctor thinks, in view of her improved condition, that it would be better to allow her to do so, and set her mind at rest. If she is as well tomorrow as she seems today, she will be able to see you. Can you come in the afternoon?”

Tomorrow! Tomorrow, then, would [see the end of the problem that was wrestling from him all peace of mind, and driving from his thoughts every other consideration. That little Mrs. Appleton held in her slender fingers the key to the mystery, was a conviction which had been growing in his mind since the day of the murder, when, after his last interview with her, he had heard, from without the closed door of her room, the half-hysterical, half-delirious, wholly despairing cry, “Barbara! He knows! He knows!”

That he had not taxed Miss Ellerslie, herself, with his knowledge of that cry, and wrung from her the truth as to at what hour during the previous night Natalie Appleton had been in the room where her husband sat, living or dead, was a self-reproach, which he strove to excuse on the plea that other and more obvious clues clamored for investigation. But he now made no further attempt to deceive himself. He had spared her because he had shrunk instinctively from causing her more pain,

from adding to the burden of her sorrow and anxiety for her sister by any act of his.

He could not comprehend his own attitude, nor give it a name. Heretofore, on every case that had fallen into his hands, he had invariably been without emotion or personal feeling of any kind, a mere machine. He had pursued the truth relentlessly to its ultimate conclusion, without a consciousness of pity or mercy, and had been unmoved by countless scenes of heart-rending grief and tragedy. But the strange, potent charms of this woman—nay, more, the inherent beauty of her soul, which his unerring intuition had bared to him at their first meeting—had rendered him helpless before it. He was no longer an automaton, an instrument of justice. Something deep within him had unfolded, and diffused through all his being a warmth that awakened him into sentient, vibrant life.

But the first awe of this strange, new emotion, which was all weakness, yet all strength, had at length been superseded by the inflexible sense of duty that had dominated him throughout all his shadowed life. If Barbara Ellerslie must suffer, so had countless other women suffered before her. He must steel himself against her tears, her pleading; against the sound of that low, exquisite voice raised in heart-sickenng agony, imploring him to desist, to shirk his duty, and besmirch his honor, for the

first time in his career; against that dangerous, maddening appeal to every sensation, every impulse, every leaping desire of his heart! Come what might, the murderer of Garret Appleton must be brought to justice!

Early in the afternoon, Inspector Hanrahan appeared, true to his promise. He shook hands with the detective, in an abashed way which ill accorded with his self-assurance of the past few days, and betrayed the result of his fruitless errand of the morning, before he spoke.

“Well, Mr. Gaunt, you were right. That trail’s ended. Hitchcock left the Crabtree cottage at half-past seven, Monday night, reached New York a little after nine, picked up a few old friends of his, who’d stuck to him, it seems, through everything, and took them out to his son’s little house in Hempstead. They all sat up most of the night together—not drinking, or carousing, or celebrating, or anything like that; just talking over old times, and planning to give him a lift over the hard places of the future. Sort of a reunion, it was. Three of them are prominent, absolutely reputable business men, and I’ve seen them all. They swear Hitchcock was in their company from half-past nine on the night of the murder, until six the next morning, when they all went to bed. Now, Appleton was alive for four hours after they claim they met Hitchcock, and it’s morally

certain he couldn't have committed the murder after six in the morning. So, that lets him out."

"And now, what?" asked Gaunt, quietly.

"Do you know what I think?" the Inspector remarked, very seriously. "I've never admitted this in a case before, even when it's been finally dropped from the police record, but—I shouldn't be surprised if this murder was never solved! It's happened before, you know; but there's never been another case like this in the annals of the department; one with so many clues at the start, and all of them leading to nothing!"

"So we are just back where we started," the detective observed.

"Yes," Inspector Hanrahan assented, ruefully. "And it'll be a week tomorrow since the murder. . . . Say, how about it being a case of suicide, and one of the family, coming on the body by chance, fixed up that little burglary stunt to save the family name from the disgrace, and all that? It'll be a good frame-up for me to send in to headquarters, anyway, if the truth don't come to light. If only we could find out that one of the family had changed the scenery like that, it'd be plain sailing!"

"It's not too late yet, you know," remarked Gaunt. "Think of those weeks we worked on the Delamater murders."

"I know; but there we had somethin' to go

on—or, rather, you did. Here we haven't a thing."

Jenkins' familiar cough was heard just outside, and then his knock sounded upon the door.

"Come in!" called the detective.

"Gentleman to see you, sir."

Gaunt took the card from the tray, and said:

"Ask him to wait just a few minutes."

Inspector Hanrahan comprehended the implied hint, and rose.

"Well, I'll be getting on," he remarked; and then, eying the card, which the detective held suspiciously averted, he added: "If you learn anything more about this business, you'll let me know? I'm up a tree, and every minute of time counts, now."

"You'll hear from me if anything turns up," Gaunt reassured him.

After Inspector Hanrahan had taken his leave, the detective summoned Jenkins again.

"What name is on this card?" he asked, quickly.

"Mr.—Ran—Randolph—Force," read Jenkins, finding difficulty in deciphering the English script.

Randolph Force! Had he come of his own volition, or because of the importunities of another? At any rate, he would be anxious, nervous, almost distraught, yet concealing his perturbation as well as he could, beneath that iron reserve of his. Yet, he would betray himself. The detective had

learned by experience in many previous cases, that nervousness first manifested itself in the mouth, the dryness of the throat, the thickness of the tongue. Randolph Force would seek to relieve that nervousness. It would induce thirst, and, if a glass of water were handy—

“Ask him to come up, now, and don’t interrupt us for anything, unless I ring the bell.”

“Very good, sir.”

“But, first, Jenkins, bring me a glass, a thin, tall glass of water, with one piece of ice in it, about the size—oh, of an egg, say, and put it on the corner of the center-table, near the right arm of that big leather chair. . . . That will do. Now, bring him up.”

The detective had not anticipated this call, and yet, gaging the man’s character as he had instinctively done at their first interview, he felt that it was not wholly inconsistent with his conception.

He heard their steps approaching, and Jenkins tapped softly, then opened the door.

“How do you do, Mr. Force?” Gaunt said. “I am glad you have come.”

They shook hands cordially, and the door closed behind Jenkins’ retreating figure. Randolph Force started mechanically toward the chair by the fireplace; but the detective stopped him suavely, and motioned to the large arm-chair by the center-

table. When they had seated themselves, Mr. Force volunteered an explanation of his call.

"I lunched with Miss Ellerslie today, Mr. Gaunt. She told me of her talk with you over the telephone this morning, and that you were to have an interview with Mrs. Appleton—young Mrs. Appleton—tomorrow. She suggested my calling this afternoon, to learn what has been going forward, if you have discovered anything which is of importance. I need not tell you how anxious we all are to have the mystery of Garret Appleton's death cleared up. The girls do not mean to be impatient; but the uncertainty, the suspense, are almost unbearable."

"Naturally," replied Gaunt. "Everything is being done that is possible, and you may tell Miss Ellerslie for me that, although I can make no promises, I am sure I shall have definite news for her before long."

"I am glad of that." Force paused, as if uncertain just how to continue, and Gaunt opened a box of cigars that stood upon the center-table.

"Will you smoke?"

"Thanks, no. I had a cigar just after luncheon, which was rather stronger than those I am accustomed to, and my throat seems dry." The young man coughed rather nervously, as he spoke. "I don't think I'll smoke any more, for awhile."

"Perhaps some water—" The detective made a

gesture toward the glass, which stood upon the center-table near his visitor's hand. Then he seated himself, and filled his pipe. "Inspector Hanrahan was here when you arrived—that was why I was compelled to keep you waiting for a few moments. He seems quite discouraged. He even went so far as to say to me, in confidence, of course, that the mystery might never be solved."

Randolph Force leaned forward suddenly in his chair.

"Well, isn't that just possible, Mr. Gaunt?"

He was unaware, perhaps, of the abrupt intensity in his tones.

"Everything is possible, Mr. Force. The fact that I have never yet lost a case upon which I was engaged—I am not boasting, I am stating a fact—does not, of course, preclude the possibility of my losing this one; but, unlike the Inspector, I am still full of confidence."

"You—you have found further evidence, perhaps, to go on?"

The younger man turned suddenly to the table, and, seizing the glass of water, gulped down half its contents, the ice clinking violently, as the glass shook in his trembling hand. It was the signal for which Gaunt had arranged.

"I have evidence—yes, and proof in abundance, of the minor details. But I will confess to you, Mr. Force, that I still lack the key to the whole

situation. The rcux of the mystery is still beyond my grasp."

"It seems like such a useless tragedy, doesn't it?" the younger man ventured. "There doesn't seem to be an atom of motive, and that weak attempt at making it seem like the work of a burglar, an attempt which a mere child could see through, seems to me like the work of a person whose mind was unhinged. I cannot make head or tail of the whole proceeding."

"Perhaps you have not a detective's instinct," Gaunt replied, quietly. "There are a half-dozen entirely different hypotheses, which would account for every detail that now seems inexplicable to you, Mr. Force, and yet each would seem like the work of a very sane person, indeed, and a very shrewd and crafty one."

"The inspiration of the rearrangement of the room, hours after Garret Appleton's death, was a clever and daring one; although bunglingly carried out, I admit. But remember that the person who sought to accomplish it was unnerved, working under great stress of grief, or apprehension, and knew the necessity for absolute silence, and the fear of being momentarily discovered at his grim task."

Randolph Force moved uneasily in his chair, and swallowed audibly. Then, he reached again for the glass of water, sipped a little, and held the

glass in his hand. The tremulous tinkling of the ice must have been noticeable to him, even in his perturbed state; for presently he put his other hand also about the glass, to steady it.

"Mrs. Appleton—Miss Ellerslie's sister—is very eager to see you. She can scarcely wait until tomorrow afternoon, Miss Ellerslie says, and is counting the hours. Naturally, the suspense is maddening for her, poor child. She is, of course, wild with anxiety to know who killed Garret, and, although her sister can give her any news you may have for us, I suppose she feels that she must hear from your own lips what has been accomplished."

"That may be," the detective said, with quiet intensity. "Or it is possible there is something she wishes to tell me."

"What could she tell you—what does she know?" Again, that quick intensity of tone. "Surely, she told you everything she knew at your last interview with her." He gave a short, forced laugh. "Perhaps, poor girl, this thing has preyed upon her mind so much that she has some hallucinations. It may be that she fancies, in her poor, dazed brain, that some insignificant, entirely irrelevant incidents may be of value to you."

"Miss Ellerslie told me, this morning, that her sister's mind was quite clear."

"Yes, of course," Randolph Force assented,

hastily. "It's clear now, you know; but she is frightfully weak, and she was delirious most of last week. In her condition, some phases of her delirium may seem very real to her. They do, often, you know, to a person, after a long illness."

"Still, there are some questions I should like to ask Mrs. Appleton—which I should have asked her immediately after the murder, had her illness not prevented my interviewing her further."

"Perhaps, Miss Ellerslie could answer them for you—or I," began the younger man, quickly; but Gaunt shook his head.

"No; only Mrs. Appleton knows."

"I see; some personal matters between herself and her late husband, perhaps?"

"Yes," the detective assented, gravely; "between herself and her late husband."

"But what have you discovered, Mr. Gaunt—those details you referred to? Perhaps, I should not ask; but, then, I am virtually a member of the family, you know, and quite as much interested in the outcome of this terrible affair as they could possibly be." The ice clinked insistently in the glass.

Gaunt smiled.

"If I told you, Mr. Force, it would really mean nothing to you. When one has a series of minor facts, but no connecting link between them, they would seem to contradict one another, would seem

to be purely extraneous, unless one has a theory to build on; and theories are dangerous things to handle. I never disclose my theories until I have proved them, and then, you see, they become no longer theories, but facts. . . . Do you know if Miss Ellerslie has seen Mrs. Finlay Appleton, or Mr. Appleton?"

"At the funeral, of course; and Mrs. Appleton has sent flowers twice to her daughter-in-law, but has not called. Yates called once, or twice, I believe; but Miss Ellerslie was too busy with her sister to see him."

"Mr. Force," Gaint leaned forward, in his turn, "are you a member of the Patriarchs' Club?"

"Yes. But I seldom go there. The club has greatly changed in character since I was first a member."

"How long ago is that?"

Randolph Force set the glass again upon the table.

"An active member? For about fifteen years?" The younger man laughed pleasantly. "I was put up for membership the day I was born. My grandfather was one of its founders. The Patriarchs' was one of the most exclusive clubs in the city."

"How do you mean it has changed in character?"

"It's become more sporty than conservative. . . .

Don't think I'm an old fogy, or a prig, Mr. Gaunt. It's only that I like polo better as a game than a gamble, I prefer yacht-racing to watching a horse-race ticker, and I would rather go to the play, or a dance, or stay quietly at home, and read, and wake up with a clear head in the morning, than sit all night in a game with men, half of whom cannot afford to lose, and drink till I cannot see the cards. The Patriarchs', although its roster of members still contains the best and oldest names in New York, has, in my estimation, ceased to be a gentlemen's club."

"Have you been there lately?"

"Not in weeks."

"Indeed! I ask because I wondered if you were there on Monday evening."

"No. I was at the wedding, with Miss Ellerslie. My mother and I called for her, and brought her home."

Gaunt had succeeded in his purpose. The change of subject, to that of the club, had had the desired effect, and the younger man's nervousness seemed to have dropped from him. Temporarily, he was off his guard.

"And during the wedding and the reception which followed, did Miss Ellerslie seem quite as usual? You noticed nothing out of the ordinary in her manner?"

"Oh, she seemed in brighter spirits than I've

seen her for a long time. She's been worrying about her sister a great deal lately, you know. Only, toward the last—" He hesitated, and his latent reserve manifested itself again.

"Toward the last—what?" asked the detective, quickly.

"I—I think she must have overheard something; some idle gossip not meant for her ears. It had distressed her greatly, and she asked to be taken home. She would not tell me what it was that she had heard; but something must have occurred to change her mood so greatly."

"Gossip! Not about herself, surely?"

"Certainly not! It must have been about—Garret!" Randolph Force spoke hastily, stung by the insinuation in Gaunt's question, as the latter had intended he should be. The young man turned to the table, raised the glass, and drained what little was left of its contents. Then, it slipped from his quivering fingers, and fell crashing to the floor, shattered into a thousand bits.

"Oh, I say—I—I'm awfully sorry!"

"It doesn't matter in the least, Mr. Force. . . . What was that you were saying about the gossip Miss Ellerslie heard at the wedding—some gossip about Garret Appleton?" But, even as he spoke, he knew that the younger man had realized his mistake the instant he had spoken, and that, now fully on his guard, he would not allow himself

to be drawn out upon that subject, and the detective wisely refrained from pursuing it.

"By the way, you are aware, of course," he went on at once, "that Mr. Appleton traded in Wall Street through the firm of Smith, Hitchcock & Gregory, at the time of their failure, are you not?"

"I knew that they were formerly his brokers; but I did not know that they were so at the time of the failure," Mr. Force replied, cautiously.

"You did not, then, hear that he lost very much money when the crash came?"

"No." The other man's tone was lower, and he moved again uneasily in his chair.

"Did you, by any chance, hear whispers, rumors, that he had gained, and not lost, by the failure?"

There was an instant's pause; and then Mr. Force parried, with an attempt at lightness:

"Oh, there are always whispers and rumors down in the Street. Finance fattens on them."

"Did you, Mr. Force, hear any such rumors?" persisted Gaunt.

"I believe I did," the younger man admitted, reluctantly. "There are always a few bad losers, in every kind of a gamble, you know. They may have been disgruntled because the crash did not seem to effect Garret particularly."

"Did you hear any rumors of crooked dealing on Garret Appleton's part, concerning that failure,

anywhere else besides on the Street? In the clubs, for instance? Think, Mr. Force."

"I—I really don't remember. It is so long ago. Of course, Garret was never very well liked by men, you know. The set into which he could have bought his way would have welcomed him; but he wasn't the buying kind. There was the other class, who threw open their doors to him because of his family, his name. But for himself—well, he was never popular. I—I think there was some talk, some guarded criticism; but it is scarcely fair to speak of it now, is it?"

"Do you remember the nature of that criticism?" Gaunt was determined to bring out his point. "Was there any talk of his having been indirectly connected with the failure?"

"Really, I cannot remember. That would be a dangerous accusation to bring against a man, wouldn't it?" Force glanced at the clock on the mantel. "I didn't know it was so late!" he exclaimed, in well, but not adequately, feigned surprise. "I have an engagement—I must be going on." He rose, and held out his hand hastily, as if eager to be gone.

"I'm glad you came in, Mr. Force," said Gaunt, rising, and shaking him warmly by the hand. "I've been very much interested in our little talk. Run in whenever you can."

"I shall be delighted to." Mr. Force had crossed

to the door, and Gaunt could hear the knob turning beneath his hand, in his anxiety to be safely beyond the reach of any further astute questioning. "You will let us know when, as you said, your theories turn to facts, Mr. Gaunt?"

"I promise you," returned Gaunt, rather grimly, "that, when they do, you shall know."

CHAPTER XV

AT HALF-PAST FOUR IN THE MORNING

AS he dressed, Gaunt thought over the interview of the afternoon.

Randolph Force had undoubtedly come to find out, if possible, what real progress the detective had made toward the discovery of the truth, and his manner had unmistakably suggested that he entertained, for some reason known only to himself, a willingness to have the tragedy sink into oblivion, an eagerness that it should remain unsolved, which was significant.

He had, however, unwittingly placed in Gaunt's possession a few details, which, in a flash of that rarely developed quality of his—that never closing eye of the mind, which so often had served him to far greater purpose than the physical vision of his confrères—had revealed to him a new train of thought, a possibility which, vague as it was, and wholly without substantiation, loomed larger as a probability with each passing moment of reflection.

If there had been rumors in the Street and in clubdom, as Randolph Force had admitted, of

Garret Appleton's possible connection with, and connivance at, the failure of Smith, Hitchcock & Gregory at the time it occurred, was it not likely that those rumors had been revived by the announcement in the papers of the pardon granted to Rupert Hitchcock, and his release? Might those whispers not have been rife in the Patriarchs', on that Monday evening when Yates had gone there to play? If so, it was not wholly improbable that he had chanced to overhear them, and, excited no less by the wine he had been drinking, in his semi-drugged condition, than by the thought of the night's losses, and the maddening problem of how he was to pay them, he had rushed home incontinently, demanded the money from his brother, and, on receiving the usual refusal, rendered more insulting by Garret Appleton's mood, had taunted his brother with the tale he had just overheard, had even, perhaps, demanded a price for his silence toward his mother and sister-in-law.

In that case, it would be small wonder if Garret, flaming into sudden rage, had uttered some unanswerable insult, which had provoked Yates into striking—might even have aroused murder in his heart.

And then, suddenly, Gaunt paused, and the hands which had been arranging his tie dropped to his side, as a swift ray of light darted through his brain.

In a revealing moment, one phase of the mystery was made clear to him, and he could have cursed himself for his stupidity of the past week. Why had that hypothesis not occurred to him at once? Had his brain become dulled, rusted, that he had not instantly grasped the significance of the chain of events, or had his ears been deaf to the cry of reason, hearing only the low, vibrating music of a woman's voice?

He determined not to delay, but to put this new theory to the test at once, that very night. With no proof to go upon but the evidence of his intuition, he meant to try a supremely daring bluff. If it failed, no more harm would have been done than that one man would consider him a fool incarnate, and, considering the man, he thought he should be able to endure that with equanimity. But something told him that he would not fail.

He dined mechanically, his mind intent upon the coming interview, then ordered his car, and drove around to the apartments of Yates Appleton. He found him at home, alone, and sulking. With no interests within himself, no resources save the usual round of restaurants and clubs, the enforced seclusion, which conventional mourning thrust upon him, no less than the notoriety, which the tragedy had cast upon the family, bored him almost to extinction, and he was seriously contemplating a greater indulgence in cocaine than

he usually allowed himself, and a consequently early and prolonged sleep, when James announced the arrival of the detective.

He sprang to his feet, and greeted his unwelcome guest with a nervous assumption of cordiality, and asked eagerly for news of progress with the investigation.

"I have learned—much, Mr. Appleton," Gaunt replied, gravely. "But it is to learn more that I am here tonight."

"I wondered why you hadn't looked me up before," Yates Appleton remarked, with studied carelessness. "I've been hanging round here all week, as I promised you I would, waiting to hear from you—and beastly stupid it's been, I can tell you, Mr. Gaunt. I knew you'd let me know if you'd learned anything definite."

"I have," the detective assured him, still very gravely, turning and facing him directly, as if he could look into his eyes. "Mr. Appleton, you assured me last week that you had been perfectly frank with me; but I find that you have not."

"I—don't understand what you mean, Mr. Gaunt. Of course, I have been frank with you!" The young man uncrossed his knees, and shrank into his chair so suddenly that it rolled backward a few inches on its casters, heavy as it was.

"When did you first hear rumors of your brother's

being on the inside in that Smith, Hitchcock & Gregory failure?" Gaunt shot at him.

"What!" Yates Appleton exclaimed; but his voice died away in his throat.

"When did you first hear of it? At the time of the failure—or in the Patriarchs' Club, last Monday night?"

The young man opened his lips; but only a queer, gurgling, strangling sound issued from them.

"When you taunted your brother with it, at midnight in the den—" the detective went on, inexorably. But there was no need for him to complete his sentence. The shot had struck home.

"So Dakers did hear me, after all—the lying hound!" Yates Appleton sprang from his chair. "I wouldn't have mentioned it to Garret—I guess it was no news to him, anyway; some of the talk must have reached his ears long ago—only, I was desperate for money with which to pay my debts, and, when he refused so insolently to help me, it came over me all at once what a fraud he was, what a damned crook, and I let him have it before I thought."

"And you had heard of it for the first time, at the club that night?"

"No. Of course not. It had been hinted at on all sides at the time of the crash, and some of the talk had come indirectly to my ears; but I hadn't paid any attention to it. I never gave

it a moment's thought. When that fellow, Hitchcock, was pardoned, a week or so ago, the talk all started up again, and I happened to overhear two men discussing it at the club after I'd finished playing on Monday night. I knew my brother better then than I had four years previously, and I realized that—that it might be true. Then, I went to get my hat and coat, as I told you—wondering how promptly I could take up those chips I'd given at the card-table, when I lost. . . . They were two of the cads I'd been playing with, too, curse them! That made me red, and I rushed home to my brother, determined to get the money from him."

"And that was when you struck him, when you accused him of being connected with the swindle?"

"N-no—not then." The young man's volubility had suddenly dried at its source.

"When?"

"When he—replied to my accusation."

"What did he say?"

"He—he recalled something I wanted to forget—something I've striven for years to live down."

"What was it?" Then, as the other appeared to hesitate, he added peremptorily: "Come, Mr. Appleton, I must know. This is no time for half-measures."

"Once, years ago, I was accused—wrongfully, of course; that goes without saying—of cheating

at cards, and I didn't knock the man down because—oh, because he was bigger than I was! That's all. My brother flung that in my face, and then I—I struck him! You know what happened after that."

"Yes." The detective straightened suddenly in his chair. "You went out, and returned home at about three, and your valet assisted you to bed, and then retired himself. . . . Did you go to sleep, immediately?"

"I suppose so. I don't remember." Young Mr. Appleton's tones had sunk from passion to mere sullenness; but, at the last question, he glanced furtively at the impassive face of his interrogator, as if some unaccustomed telepathic wave had conveyed to his shrinking mind a premonition of what was to come.

"When did you wake? Do you know what time it was?"

"Why, of—of course! At half-past six, or thereabouts, when Katie screamed—"

"No—no!" Gaunt interrupted, speaking with dangerous quietness. "I mean before that, when you wakened, and could not sleep again—when you dared use no more cocaine, and went down-stairs, probably for a drink from the decanter, which you knew was in the den, and found your brother's body—"

A snarling scream, like that of a trapped animal,

rent the air, and cut off the sound of the detective's voice, and then the quick, gasping sobs of a man's hysteria, with a high, thin wail of craven fear running through them, indescribably repulsive to listen to.

Gaunt waited until the outburst had somewhat spent itself, and then, to make assurance doubly sure, he asked sternly:

"What are you going to do with them?"

The sobs gradually grew more faint, and Yates Appleton lay back once more in his chair, broken and exhausted with the storm of emotion, which had swept all thought, all effort, from him, and bared his drug-shattered nerves to the torturing, penetrating, inner gaze of his terrible inquisitor.

"What do you—mean?" he breathed. "Do with—what?"

"The things you took from your brother's body, to make it appear that a burglary had been committed. You could not hide them here; for they would be found, and your guilt be assumed as a foregone conclusion. You would not have dared to keep them much longer, and you don't know how to get rid of them. What are you going to do with them?"

"I don't know—I don't know!" the young man moaned, his head between his hands. "They've been before my eyes day and night, night and day! I didn't want to take them with me. Their very

touch is loathesome to me; but I couldn't leave them in the den anywhere, for fear, in the ransacking the police would give the place, they would be found, and the burglary theory proved a fraud. I did not realize how I bungled it—how easily the truth would be discovered."

"But why did you do it?" Gaunt asked, quite as if he did not know the reason, had not known all, in that illuminating flash of inspiration of a few hours before. "Why did you rearrange the room, and remove your brother's valuables? Why didn't you shout, and arouse the house, and start the search for the slayer?"

"Oh, can't you understand?" Yates Appleton was eagerly, pathetically anxious to unburden himself of the weight he had carried about with him in silence, for an interminable week. Concealment appeared to be no longer within the range of his thoughts, and he exhibited an almost child-like faith in the belief that Gaunt would recognize the truth, had already recognized it, and that he was safer in the detective's hands than his own. "I was afraid I should be accused of having killed him. The chauffeur knew that I had returned to the house at midnight, remained half an hour, and come out in a towering rage, with my hand all bruised, too. I—I must have given Garret a terrific blow. Then, I didn't know who might have seen me enter or leave, or have heard us quarreling.

As it was, you see, Dakers did hear us. As no one else ever went near the den at night, especially after twelve o'clock, but my brother himself, I was sure that, had I been seen or heard at midnight, I should be at once accused, when the crime was discovered.

"Before the chauffeur had an opportunity to hear of the murder, I gave him a hundred dollars to say nothing of my having gone home at twelve the night before, and I've been in terror since, lest he should either come and blackmail me for the rest of my life, or go to the police. When I found out that you knew of my going home like that, and still did not have me arrested, I plucked up a little courage; for I knew you didn't believe me guilty, and, if you didn't, nobody else would be likely to. I was afraid, though, to have you discover that it was I who changed the scene so as to make it look like the result of a robbery; for then you might perhaps think me guilty. . . . I ought to have told you the truth from the first."

"Suppose you do so now, Mr. Appleton. Tell me the truth, as far as you know it, about last Monday night."

"Everything that I have told you is the truth, the whole truth, up to half-past four in the morning!"

"That was when you first awakened?"

"Yes; or a little before. I tried to sleep; but I

couldn't; and you were right in saying that I was afraid to use any more cocaine—I was! I'd used too much already, the night before, and I felt like the mischief from it, or I should have doped myself for fair, and slept it off. I thought a drink would help me; but I had nothing of that sort in my rooms. Then I remembered that decanter in the den, if Garret hadn't emptied it. It was easier to get to than the cellarette in the dining-room, and, besides, Dakers had probably locked that up for the night—he is so confoundedly methodical! There was a night-light burning, of course, and I got up and looked at my watch, which was lying on the dresser. It was half-past four o'clock. I knew then that my brother would either have gone to bed, or be asleep in his chair in the den. That—that had happened before, and I knew that, if he was there, he would not hear me—his sleep would be too sound—" he broke off, with a gulping sob.

"So you went down?" asked Gaunt, gently.

"Yes. I put on a robe and a pair of soft slippers, and got down as quietly as I could. The night-lamp was burning in the hall, and I could see, as I drew near it, that the light was still in the den, too. When I reached the door—" he faltered, and shuddering, buried his face in his hands.

"Well, go on, Mr. Appleton. I know how difficult it is for you; but we must get this over.

I want to know every detail. What did you see?"

"Garret—Garret was sitting there in his chair by the library-table; but he wasn't asleep. His eyes were wide open and set, staring horribly straight into mine. He was clutching the arms of his chair, his head was thrown back, and there was the most awful expression of fear—fear for his life—on his face. Everything whirled around and went black for a minute before my eyes, and I clung to the door-casing to keep from sinking down upon the floor. Then, gradually, things cleared, and I saw that great red stain on Garret's shirt front. The lower drawer of the table was open, and his revolver was lying on the table—on the farther side of the table from him. Then I knew that he had been murdered."

"How was the revolver pointing?"

"Toward him, just as the one who had fired the shot had laid it down. It couldn't have been suicide; for he must have died instantly. He wouldn't have had time to reach over and place the revolver there; and, even if he had, his—his blood would have dripped upon the blotting-pad, which lay on the table. If he'd shot himself, the revolver would have still been clutched in his hand, or dropped to the floor beside him. And then I knew that Garret was too—too much of a coward to have taken his own life. For just one

moment, I went crazy, I think, and I wondered if I had done it, myself! You see, my mind was still clouded from the effects of the cocaine and the wine I'd been drinking the night before, and I—I couldn't remember."

"Then sanity returned to me, partially, at least, and I knew I could not have done so terrible a thing. Suddenly, I remembered our quarrel of the night, remembered that my chauffeur alone knew of my return to the house, and that he might admit it to the police. I determined to buy him off. And then the horrible thought struck me: Suppose anyone had seen me, there in the den with my brother, or had heard us quarreling? If they had, and told of it, I would inevitably be arrested on circumstantial evidence; I might perhaps be convicted, might be electrocuted for the murder of my brother!"

"And then the idea came to you of giving the crime the appearance of having taken place during a burglary, or attempted burglary?"

"Yes. I opened the window, and, taking a heavy bronze paper-knife from the table, I bent the hasp of the fastening to make it look as if it had been forced. The paper-knife was all twisted out of shape, when I'd finished; so I had to take that away with me, too. I was afraid to leave it there. I've waited every day since for it to be missed, and wondered why it hadn't been; but

there were so many small articles like it scattered about on the table-top, that I presume whoever cleaned up the den after—after it was all over, and the police had finished searching for clues, didn't notice that it was gone. I don't suppose any of the family has gone near that room, since."

"What did you do after that?"

"I went back to the table, and broke the revolver. I found, as I expected, that one cartridge had been fired; so I reloaded it—I knew where the box of cartridges was, in the same drawer in the table, the drawer which was open. I cleaned the revolver, too, as well as I could, with my handkerchief, which I afterward burned, here in this grate; but my hands were shaking terribly, and I hadn't any time to lose, so I didn't make a very thorough job of it. It was horrible, working away like that, with the fear every moment of being discovered! I knew that, in the ordinary course of events, no one in the house would be stirring for an hour and a half, or two hours longer; but someone might, by sheer accident, come down, and if I had been found doing what I was doing, there would be no hope for me!"

Yates Appleton had risen, as if inaction were a torture, and he was pacing up and down the room, convulsively clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back, his head sunk forward on his chest.

"You put the revolver back, then?" Gaunt urged him on, but quietly, so as not to intrude his own personality any more than could be helped; for the younger man was talking as if to himself, as if communing alone with his own thoughts, living over again in retrospection every detail of that fearful hour.

"Yes. And I stuffed my handkerchief back in my pocket. It was reeking with oil and with powder. Then—then I approached my brother's body. That was the worst of all! He was limp. and cold—horribly cold! I took everything of value. I forced myself to remember, to overlook nothing, even the little frat pin, which he would never be without, and which he wore that night, pinned inside his vest-pocket. The vest was of soft white silk, and in my nervousness I could not find the catch of the pin, and jerked it away. I tore the lining of the pocket a little in doing so, and that was how you discovered about it, I guess. Anyhow, when you questioned me, concerning it, in the afternoon, I realized that, in taking it, I had overreached myself; for only someone intimately connected with Garret would have known about his wearing the pin that way."

"What did you do with the things as you removed them?"

"Put them in my pocket, loosely. In getting them, my—my hands came in contact with Gar-

ret's blood, and it turned me sick for a moment; then another idea came to me. The blood was thick, and drying in great clots, and I shut my eyes and pressed my hands on the shirtfront, over the wound. Then I rushed over to the window, and smeared the curtains, and the rug before it, to make sure that attention would be directed there. I cleaned my hands as well as I could on the curtains, turned out the light, and, literally, flew to my room. I did not dare take a last look at my poor brother—his dead eyes had seemed to be following me about the room accusingly, while I worked, and I was afraid that, if I glanced at him, I should shriek aloud!"

"What did you do when you regained your room?"

"I don't know. The reaction came, and I think I went mad for a little while. I remember rolling in mental agony upon my bed, stifling my groans, forcing myself to remember that I must be silent, must make no sound. Then, I grew a little calmer, and realized that I had work to do. I went in the bath-room first, and bathed carefully, then examined my clothes minutely for any traces of blood. There were none, or upon my hands or body, save under my finger-nails, where a little had dried. These I cleaned, and then cleaned the brush thoroughly, too. Then I took the money and valuables, made them into a tightly rolled

packet, and, for the time being, I thrust it in the only place I knew my valet, or the housemaid, would not find it the next day—far back on the top of the wardrobe. It was there when you questioned, me, in my room. Later, I sent James down-stairs on an errand, took the packet, and thrust it into my pocket.

“When I got here, after leaving Mother at the Blenheim, I found my friend from whom I had arranged to take over this apartment, waiting to condole with me about the tragedy, and to hand me the keys. I knew there was a safe—built on the wall, over there just behind you—and I made my friend give me the combination before he left. After he had gone, I got my man, James, out of the room on some pretext, and, opening the safe, I put the packet in there. And what to do with it, I don’t know.”

“Mr. Appleton, didn’t it occur to you to wonder who actually did kill your brother?”

“Not until afterward. I know it seems strange; but my brain felt numb, and all I thought of was my own safety. When the burglary subterfuge was so quickly discovered, and the fact that Garret was killed with his own revolver, I felt that I was lost, and I fought, struggled, only for my life. Later in the day, when things quieted down a bit, I began to think of my brother, and how he came to his death. Mr. Gaunt, it is an utter, absolute mystery

to me—believe me or not, as you please. I cannot think, cannot imagine, who could have done this thing! There doesn't seem to be a shadow of motive. I can think of nothing else, and it is driving me mad, mad! For God's sake, if you know, if you suspect, tell me! I cannot endure it much longer!"

"You must be patient, Mr. Appleton. Think of your brother's wife, of your mother! They are enduring this suspense, too; and they are only women."

"But they are not carrying around with them the secret that I am—the secret of that awful hour early in the morning! Mr. Gaunt, you must help me—you must! What shall I do with that packet in the safe—with the things I took from my brother's body? If I turn them over to the police, they will arrest me—I know that. How can I dispose of them?"

"If I were you, Mr. Appleton, I should wait until the murderer is apprehended. Then, when his guilt is proved, you can go to your mother and your brother's wife, and tell them the truth. They will believe you then, of course. If, on the other hand, this mystery is never solved," a curious hard note had swept into the detective's voice with the last words, "I should advise you still to go to those two women, and tell them everything, just as you have told me. They will, they must, believe you in time. At any rate, for the sake of

the family name, they will not denounce you. Give them your brother's valuables, and allow them to make what disposition of them they will."

"They will never believe me—never! Something else must be done with them. I wish they were at the bottom of the sea."

The Inspector's words returned to Gaunt's mind with a new significance, and he returned, quietly.

"Then why not place them there, yourself, Mr. Appleton? Go on some short coast trip, and, when you are well out of sight of land, and there is no one to see you, drop the package, properly weighted, overboard. This advice is contrary to justice, as the police interpret it, I know; but I firmly believe you to be innocent of the death of your brother, and there is no use in running your neck into a noose."

"Ah, thank you, Mr. Gaunt! That is just what I will do. I should never have thought of it," the other man cried, brokenly. "Thank God, you don't believe me guilty!"

"The police are all at sea. They have not, so far as I know, a single clue; and they would seize upon anyone, on the slenderest thread of evidence. It behooves you to be extremely careful."

"I know; I shall try to be. You—you're not going, Mr. Gaunt?" he added, wistfully, as the detective rose. He was as glad of this presence,

now that he had unburdened himself, as he had previously been in fear of it.

"I must. It is late, and I have work to do to-morrow. Try a sleeping-powder, some coal-tar product, tonight, instead of that cocaine, and see if you can get a little real rest, or you'll be a wreck. Remember, you may yet need all your nerve and strength."

"I will, sir," Yates Appleton replied, with the respectful promptitude of a school-boy addressing the master. "Good-night, and thank you—thank you!"

CHAPTER XVI

NATALIE

DAMON GAUNT would not have been human if he could have helped congratulating himself the next morning on the result of the previous evening's work. Both the shots had told, and, although they had been the result more of intuition, of a subtle guess, than pure reasoning, they had proved to be true to the mark. Then, quite suddenly his mood changed, and he felt disgusted with himself, for his vanity.

"I'm getting to be as bad as Hanrahan," he thought; "gloating over the little I've done, when the work isn't half-finished. I've only succeeded as yet in cleaning up a few minor details. The great question remains unanswered, the real truth unproved!"

He had scarcely finished his breakfast, when Jenkins announced that a lady was waiting in the library to see him. She had refused to give her name, but said that her business was most important. Would Mr. Gaunt please see her at once, if possible?

As the detective opened the door of the library—that room heretofore sacred to the odor of tobacco only—a heavy Oriental scent was wafted unmistakably to his nostrils, and he smiled comprehendingly. The perfume of the Taj Mahal! Could Doris Carhart's presence in his rooms mean further revelations? He had felt that she had not been entirely frank with him at their last interview; but he thought he had read understandingly between the lines. What did her visit portend?

He entered, and, hearing a slight rustle, turned in the direction from which it came, holding out his hand, the smile still upon his lips.

"Good-morning, Miss Carhart," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Gaunt!" she exclaimed. "How did you know it was I? I gave no name—"

"How did I know you had been in the den at the Appleton's last Monday evening?" he returned. "You undervalue the penetrating power of the scent you use."

"Ah, that is it, of course!" She sighed in relief. Then, seating herself in the chair he pushed toward her, she went on: "I know you will think it very strange—my coming here like this, I mean—but I simply had to see you, Mr. Gaunt! Ever

since you called on me last week, I've been thinking things over, and the more I thought, the more I worried. I couldn't sleep at all last night, and at dawn I determined to come to you, and tell you all the truth. For I did not tell you everything, last week, Mr. Gaunt—I could not!”

“I knew that you were not entirely frank with me,” remarked the detective.

“You knew it? Yet you did not go to my father, as you had threatened!” she countered.

“Because I thought I knew what you were keeping back, and understood the reason why,” he replied, quietly.

“I only kept silent because—because it was all past and gone, and there seemed no reason for divulging to anyone that which had been said to me in the most sacred confidence. As long as no one else had known, I determined that no one ever should. It was a disgraceful, ignoble thing; but it came to nothing in the end, and I felt that it should be allowed to die with the man who had conceived it. But, after you had gone, I remembered something, and I wondered if, after all, I had been the only one to hear what he had said.”

“You have come here to be frank with me, Miss Carhart? Then, suppose you tell me the

whole story." Gaunt drew his chair up closer to hers, and in his voice were the kind, fatherly accents that had drawn from reluctant feminine lips many a more heinous confession than the one trembling on hers.

"It was all true, as I told you, Mr. Gaunt, that I had been flirting with Garret Appleton, to punish him for marrying someone else. I could not help detesting the woman who had taken the place that was to have been mine, and, when I saw that she suffered, I—I was glad!" She paused for a moment, then went on in a low voice: "But, now, I am sorry—oh, so sorry! I would go to her, if I dared, and explain, beg her to forgive me, for the sorrow I brought her. But she would not listen to me—it is too late, now! You know, I—I had cared greatly for Garret Appleton. I had loved him ever since I was a little girl, and, when, after our foolish quarrel, he married Natalie Ellerslie, it almost broke my heart. I never let him see it, though, and I thought my love for him was a thing of the past. I only wanted to make him—to make them both—suffer, as I had suffered!"

Again she paused, as if she found her task increasingly difficult to perform; but he said nothing, and she resolutely forced herself to continue.

"I did not know, did not realize, that I had

carried things too far with Garret, until that night in the den. As I have told you, he did not seem to be quite—quite himself, and my fast-approaching departure for Europe must have maddened him. While I sat there on the divan, with the curios he had brought me there to see spread out beside me, he suddenly began to speak, in a different tone from any that I had ever heard from him—a queer, thickened, hurried voice, as if he was himself ashamed of the words he was uttering.”

As she stopped again, as if unable to go on, Gaunt leaned forward, and asked in a gentle, but insistent, voice:

“What did he say to you, Miss Carhart? Please tell me every word that you can remember.”

“I can’t remember the words. His voice sounded in my ears as if it came from a great distance, and I seemed to be under a stifling cloud of horror and loathing. I only remember the meaning of the thing he proposed doing. It was an infamous thing, Mr. Gaunt! It is a hideous, black thought, which should be buried with him; but you want to know all the truth, and you shall! He told me that he was going to arrange a divorce, that he might marry me! He said his wife would never consent to free him, especially—especially now—

and that the only thing left for him to do was to divorce her, on fabricated proof. He was going to desert her, and the little child that would be theirs, and blacken her name falsely, disgracing her forever in the eyes of the world—and for me! He thought that I would step into her place, that I would be his wife over the ashes of her reputation, her honor!

“I sat there, turning over and over in my hands the foolish, exquisitely carved bits of ivory, trying to force myself to realize that I heard aright, that he was actually proposing this monstrous thing! At length, when he had finished, I swept the ivories from my knee, and rose. I tried to speak; but somehow I couldn’t. I hadn’t uttered a word since he had started. Now, all I could think of was to get away, to escape from him forever, from the sight of him and the sound of his voice. I glanced instinctively at the open door of the den—and I saw, or fancied I saw, on the wall opposite, in the hall, the faint shadow of a crouching figure, listening.”

“You are not sure of it, then?” asked Gaunt, eagerly. “You are not sure that there actually was someone there?”

“No, I may have fancied it, as I say; but, somehow, I felt that there was someone out there, listen-

ing, even before I caught a glimpse of the shadow. While I watched it, it wavered, and suddenly disappeared, and then—then I turned to him. We had no quarrel; he did not accuse me of flirting with him, and leading him on, as I told you he did. Instead, it was I who told him the truth, and why I had done so. Then I told him just how I felt about his vile, contemptible proposition, and how I loathed him for entertaining such a thought. I blamed myself, frankly, for what I had done; but I had meant it only for a mild, discreet flirtation, and intended that my departure for Europe should end it all for all time. And he had been planning this infamous thing against that poor little woman up-stairs, who had never done me any intentional harm, as I had her! I told him how low, how terrible, I thought his plan, and how I detested it—how I hoped I should never see his face again. He fell back against the table, white and speechless, and I walked straight out of his den and back to my father.”

“Did you see anyone in the hall, or on the stairs, as you went?”

“No, Mr. Gaunt; no one. Garret followed me in a few minutes, and I knew him well enough to know that he was in one of his silent, white-hot rages. I could not bear to remain in the same

room where he was; I felt that I could not breathe! I was unspeakably glad when the time came for us to return home."

"You felt nothing for him then but a passionate loathing?"

"Nothing. . . . But what I suffered during the long hours of that night, no one can ever know. When morning came, I realized that, without being conscious of it, I must still have cared for him, in spite of his marriage, in spite of everything, without being conscious of it myself. I must have gone on loving him, up to the moment in the den, the night before, when he had disclosed to me the depth of his depravity, when I learned for the first time how dishonorable he was. Had he lived, I would never, never have seen him, have entered his presence again."

She was silent, and, for a few minutes, there was no sound.

Then he prompted her, gently.

"And in the morning, when Marie telephoned to you?"

"At first, I couldn't realize it, any more than I could realize the night before that I had heard him aright. Then, when I knew that he was dead—" She faltered, and suddenly buried her face in her hands. Then, after a moment, she

lifted her head, and went on, in a low, stifled voice. "My love for him seemed to come back—not love for the man I had grown to know in the last three years, the hard, cynical, coarsened man of the world, the husband of another woman—but my love for the boy I had first known, the boy I had given my heart to when I was a little girl."

She abruptly ceased speaking, and rose, drawing her furs about her with a little, self-contemptuous laugh, which was half a shudder.

"That is all," she said. "And now, Mr. Gaunt, if you don't mind, I think I will go. I have told you everything; I have talked to you as I would talk to no other living person. I am glad that we sail on Wednesday. I feel very tired, and very—old. I'm not even interested in knowing who killed him, or why. I don't even care. Isn't it funny? I seem to be numb, and dead—as dead as he is!"

"I understand, and, believe me, I am sorry, Miss Carhart." Gaunt's tone was, indeed, deeply moved. She was a thoughtless, rather selfish, spoiled child, nothing more. And he prayed that she might never know what she had done; might never be brought to a realization of the havoc and tragedy she had wrought.

She held out a little hand, which he could not see, and then, with a pathetic shrug of her shoulders, she dropped her arm limply to her side, and turned to the door. At the threshold, he halted her.

"I wish you could tell me more about that shadow you saw, or fancied you saw, in the hall, Miss Carhart. You say it looked like a crouching figure. A woman's or a man's?"

"A woman's, I think," she answered, hesitatingly. "At least, the head appeared to be abnormally large and irregular, as if it was a woman, with her hair puffed out, and she seemed to have on a loose, flowing gown of some sort; but it was all very faint and indistinct."

"If there was actually a woman listening there in the hall, have you any idea in your own mind, Miss Carhart, as to who she might have been?" he asked gravely, coming slowly toward her.

She shrank, and, for an instant, made no reply. Then she burst out passionately:

"Oh, don't ask me that, Mr. Gaunt! In mercy, don't ask me! I have endured all I can! Please, please, let me go."

"I won't ask you, Miss Carhart. I am grateful to you for having come to me as you did. Thank you, and—good-by."

She laid her hand hesitatingly in his for a moment, and then slipped quietly away, and from his window he heard the diminishing hum of her motor car.

He turned away with a sigh. What she had told him was parallel with what he had himself deduced; only he had not believed that Garret Appleton would have gone to such lengths, would have seriously suggested besmirching his wife's character, in order to secure what he felt to be his own happiness.

Doris Carhart's testimony had, in the main, but substantiated the theory against which he had struggled, only to be compelled to allow it to possess him, in the end. He shrank from it, and, for the first time in his career, his duty seemed a hard and cruel thing. But he knew that for him there could be no turning from it. He must discover the truth.

When he presented himself at the Appleton house, in the early afternoon, Barbara Ellerslie met him in the drawing-room.

"I am glad you have come," she said quietly, giving him her hand. "My sister has been impatient all day to see you."

"She is better? She is able to stand the strain of even a most commonplace interview?" he asked,

and found himself listening eagerly for her reply, not for the words themselves, but for the maddening sweetness of her throbbing tones.

"Yes. She is very weak still, of course; but I think her mind is quite clear, and she has promised me to try to control herself. But you will be very careful, Mr. Gaunt? You will remember that we have only just succeeded in snatching her back from death—or what would be infinitely worse, the loss of her reason?"

"I will remember," he replied, gravely.

Turning, she led the way to young Mrs. Appleton's room—the room where, on that day, almost on that very hour, a week ago, he had left her with that agonized betrayal upon her lips.

He found her, as before, bolstered up among the soft cushions of her *chaise longue*, and with an eager cry she gave him her hand.

"Oh, Mr. Gaunt! You have come, at last! They wouldn't let me see you before, and there is so much I must talk over with you!" Her voice was very faint and weak; but the high-pitched, drawling notes reminded him somehow, even more than before, of his sister's richer, more mellow tones, and his heart contracted suddenly within him.

"I am glad that you are better, Mrs. Appleton,"

he replied, with grave gentleness. There was a portentousness, almost a solemnity, in his voice which made her gaze up quickly, fearfully, into his face. She looked long, and what she read there evidently decided her upon some paramount question, which had troubled or vexed her. For such an instant, her pale, pretty lips trembled childishly, and her gaze wandered wistfully to the sunlight streaming in at the window. She could, from where she lay, just see the tops of the leafless trees in the park, and the broad expanse of the blue sky above them. Then, her trembling ceased, and a sublime look, almost of exaltation, settled upon her delicate little face, maturing and ennobling it.

“You have come to tell me something, Mr. Gaunt?” she asked; and he started involuntarily at the subtle change in her voice. Weak it still was, but trembling no longer, and in poise, in perfect control, it equaled her sister’s. “You have discovered who killed my husband?”

“I think so.” The gravity, the gentleness, increased in Gaunt’s tone. “Mrs. Appleton, I have a duty to perform, and, difficult and repugnant as my task may be, I must accomplish it. Are you strong enough yet to bear the truth? Will you try to be very brave?”

"You need not fear for me. I shall be strong—now. Will you tell me, please, what you have learned?"

"You have already told me, Mrs. Appleton, that you left the drawing-room and your guests, on the last night of your husband's life, and went to your room, pleading indisposition, because you could not endure witnessing the—let us say, the open flirtation of your husband and another woman. That is true, is it not?"

"Perfectly true."

"At what time did you leave the others?"

"At ten o'clock. I know, because, when I reached my room, I looked at the time to count how long I should have to wait before—before my sister returned. I was wretchedly lonely and unhappy, and I wanted her."

"You could not remain in your room, though, could you? Perhaps you fancied your guests had gone, and that your husband was alone in the den. That I do not know; but I do know that you went down nearly to the door of the den, and overheard your husband talking to Miss Carhart. At what time was that, Mrs. Appleton?"

"At eleven," she returned, composedly. There was in her voice no surprise, no shade of wonderment, at his knowledge. She was as one who had

thrown aside all artifice, all subterfuge; one who stoically, fatalistically awaited an inevitable eventuality. "As you surmised, I supposed our guests had gone, and I went down to the den to talk to my husband about a private matter. I knew that otherwise I should see him no more that night, and he was always quite unapproachable in the morning; so I desired to have it over with, there and then. I had almost reached the door of the den, when I heard his voice, and I—stopped. Do you know what I heard? He, my husband, and the girl who was a guest beneath my roof, were conspiring together, to sully my own good name, that my husband might cast me aside, dishonored, and make her his wife, in my stead!"

"I think you wrong her," remarked Gaunt, quietly.

"I—wrong her?" Her voice held a note of query; but it was a listless one.

"You heard your husband's voice, Mrs. Appleton; but did you hear hers?"

"No. When I had heard all I wanted to from Garret's own lips, I turned and fled to my room."

"Had you waited, you would have heard her denounce him for his infamous plan; heard her

tell him how she loathed him for it, and that she hoped never to see his face again."

"She never will," Mrs. Appleton observed. Something in the cold, emotionless young voice made Gaunt shiver, in spite of himself. It was as if she stood beyond the pale of all things human and sentient with life. If only she would weep, or rage in passion against this girl, whom she believed had meant to supplant her, he would have understood, have known how to handle the situation. But this stony calmness, this serene detachment from all things vital, was utterly unnatural, and unique in his experience. A sudden shock, a thrust in the dark, might arouse her, might render her as pliant in his hands as she had been on their last interview.

"And so," he began briskly in a louder, less gentle voice, "when you had heard all you wanted to, you went back to your room, waited until your sister came home, and told her. To save you from the threatened dishonor, she descended to the den, and—"

"You are wrong, Mr. Gaunt." That dreadful, toneless voice sounded unchanged by a shade upon his ears. "You are mistaken. It was not Barbara. It was I who killed him."

"You?" he cried, in well-feigned surprise.



"I—wrong her?" Her voice held a note of query; but it was a listless one.

"Yes. Was I not justified? Did he not merit death at my hands?"

There was a pause, and then he said quietly:

"Tell me what you did, Mrs. Appleton."

"I fled to my room, as I told you, and waited until long after our guests had gone, and the house was quiet. Then, I went straight down to the den, and faced Garret, and told him what I had heard him say. He tried to lie out of it, at first; but finally he admitted it, and defied me. I opened the drawer where I knew he kept his revolver, and took it out, and—shot him."

"At what time did you descend to the den the second time—the last time, Mrs. Appleton?"

"I don't know, exactly. Some time after midnight."

"And after you had shot your husband, what did you do?"

"I laid the revolver down—oh, I forgot to tell you that it was when I went around the table to get the revolver that I caught my hair on the hanging lamp, and pulled off that strand which you found there."

"Is that so? Then you had not been in the den that morning?"

"No, Mr. Gaunt."

"But your sister corroborated you. She said you had been."

"She knew—the truth. She lied—for me. That is like Barbara."

"Well, Mrs. Appleton, what did you do after you laid the revolver down?"

"I went back to my room, and, when Barbara came home, I told her what I had done, and why."

"Then it was Miss Ellerslie who went down later and changed the appearance of the room, to give the impression that the murder had been committed during an attempt at burglary?"

"Yes."

"You are perfectly sure of this?"

"Quite sure. She—told me herself, afterward, that she had done so."

"And she has your husband's money and valuables?"

"I think so. I don't know what she had done with them."

"Your sister returned from the wedding festivities at one o'clock, and it was midnight, or after, when you descended to the den. Therefore, it was during that hour, between twelve and one, that you killed your husband?"

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. . . . When—are you going to take me away?"

"Away—where?" this time it was the detective who was, for once, caught off his guard.

"Why, to prison." There was for the first time a flicker of interest in her voice. "Let me see Barbara just once before you take me away! I must see my sister—alone!"

"Oh, we won't talk about taking you to prison until you are better. In fact, I won't notify Inspector Hanrahan or the police yet, until you are able to be moved. I'm not afraid, now that you have confessed, that you will try to escape. If you will give me your word, Mrs. Appleton, not to run away, we will keep this a secret between our two selves for a time."

"Oh, Mr. Gaunt, how good, how very kind, you are! Now I can have a few days longer with my sister, can't I? I promise you—oh, I will take any oath you please, that I will be here ready to go with the police when they come for me!"

The soft, brown, sightless eyes of Damon Gaunt grew even softer and misty, and there was a queer choke in his voice as he said, very gently:

"I can trust you, Mrs. Appleton."

She smiled faintly, and laid her little hand on

his coat-sleeve in silent gratitude. Then, she turned again to the window, where the dazzling blue was changing to a delicate gray, to meet the westering sun; and in her eyes was no longing, no wistfulness, only a deep content.

CHAPTER XVII

FAILURE AND VICTORY

DAMON GAUNT lay back in his library chair inert, exhausted mentally and spiritually with the battle which he had waged with himself and his conscience for two long hours. Now, it was ended, the victory was won, and over his spirit had crept the sacred peace of renunciation.

In the pale, ghastly glow from the green-shaded lamp, his thin face seemed older than it had ever looked before, the lines more sharply drawn, the cheek-bones more prominent, the closed eyes more sunken. But a smile, which was almost ethereal, wreathed his smooth-shaven, finely chiseled lips, and about his brow was that same expression of serenity which had rested upon young Mrs. Appleton's that afternoon, when she had so calmly confessed the murder of her husband.

How long he remained motionless in his chair before the empty hearth, Gaunt never knew. He became aware gradually of a deferential, but

insistent, knocking on the locked door. With an effort, he roused himself from his reverie, and called wearily:

“What is it?”

“Mr. Force, sir. Says he will see you, sir—he won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. I told him I had orders not to disturb you—”

“Never mind. Bring him up, Jenkins.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a long sigh of relief, audible even through the door, and Jenkins hurried off. He had been a worried man, had Jenkins, since his master returned that afternoon. The door locked upon him, Miss Barnes dismissed for the day, dinner sent away untasted, and gruff orders issued that he was on no account to be disturbed! This was a new Damon Gaunt to him. The like had never happened before in all the faithful years of his service. He was more thankful than he could have expressed to Mr. Force; for his advent, volcanic as it was, had broken the spell.

Gaunt felt for the electric button in the wall, switched on the lights, and, striding over to the door, unlocked it.

There was a quick, firm tread down the hall, and Randolph Force fairly burst into the room.

“What does it mean?” he cried hoarsely, waiving

any more conventional salutation. "Before God, Gaunt, what does it mean?"

"If you'll tell me what you mean, my dear fellow, I may be able to help you," the detective returned, quietly.

"It's Barbara! I've just come from her. She—she's broken our engagement! She won't give me any reason; but she says her decision is irrevocable, and she means it! She doesn't deny that she loves me; but merely says any thought of marriage between us would be impossible!"

"Why have you come to me, Mr. Force?" asked Gaunt. "I know nothing of Miss Ellerskie's private affairs."

"I've come to you because I know her decision has something to do with this cursed affair—with the murder of Garret Appleton! She has changed since this morning, when I telephoned her—changed since you talked with her sister this afternoon! Gaunt, for God's sake, tell me what it means!"

"I do not know. Until I have seen Miss Ellerslie myself and talked with her, I can tell you nothing." The detective's tone was kindly, but decisive.

"Oh, you'll see her, fast enough. She's coming here tonight to see you. She told me so. She may be here at any moment, and I must be off

before she comes. She has learned, somehow, that the foreign post of which I told you is still open to me. Should I accept it, I must sail a week from next Wednesday, on the sixth of November. She insists that I do accept it, and sail—alone. She says that, if I love her—and I do, God knows—I must prove my love by obeying her command, and that I must not relinquish it and return, no matter what I hear. What can she mean? If I obeyed her, and took this post which has been offered me, what is it that I might hear, which would cause me to rush back to her side? What is it?" There was no query in the man's tones, only an agony, an entreaty, which was but thinly veiled. Gaunt approached the young man, and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"I know no more than you, Mr. Force," he replied, with a significant intensity in his voice, which was like a bracing dash of icy water on the other's frenzied mind. "She is coming here to-night you say. She may be here at any moment. After my interview with her, I may be able to help you—may be in a position to tell you more. If you will accept my advice, you will go to your rooms at once, and remain there until you hear from me—or from her."

"From her?" Randolph Force cried out, in trem-

bling tones. "From her? Oh, Gaunt, you don't mean that you—"

"I mean," interrupted Damon Gaunt, in stern haste, "that within two hours you will hear from me, or from her. . . . Is that a motor that I hear below? You'd better go, Mr. Force."

Speechlessly, the young man seized his hand, and wrung it convulsively. Then, with an inarticulate sob, he dashed from the room.

Gaunt flung himself again in his chair. There had been no purring of a motor car outside. He had wanted to get Randolph Force out of the way before that young man's lack of self-control led him to commit himself in speech, in a way he would perhaps forever regret. And, too, he must have time to think, to reflect, to prepare himself for the hour at hand—the hour that would be the most difficult one of all his life.

All too soon, he heard her car approach swiftly, and stop with a grinding of brakes at the curb, and Jenkins was not half-way to the library door to announce her coming, when his master called him to ask the lady to come in.

She came slowly, and hesitated on the threshold.

"Mr. Gaunt," her sweet, low voice was steady; but there was a haunting sadness in its cadence, which struck at his heart, "my sister has told

me of your interview with her this afternoon, of everything that was said. I have come to you to thank you, if I can, for your great kindness, your forbearance, in offering to delay the—final formalities, until she is better able to endure them. But I have come, also, for another purpose; to beg you, to implore you on my knees, if I must, to grant me an extraordinary—a supreme—favor. You have offered to put matters off for a few days. Will you do so until after the sixth of November, a week from next Wednesday? I have no right to ask this of you, I know, and I cannot explain my reason for doing so; but, if you find it compatible with your duty, will you do this for me? On the sixth, I shall have something to tell you which may—may change your point of view.”

There was a silence for a moment. Gaunt seemed to be having an inward struggle with himself, as if he found speech difficult. Then, he pushed forward a great, soft-leather arm-chair, and, placing his own near, he said:

“Won’t you sit here, Miss Ellerslie, and let us talk for a little? There is something I would like to say to you.”

Wondering, she took the chair he offered, and unfastened the furs at her throat. He seated himself, also, and silence fell again between them. He

seemed to have fallen into a reverie, to have forgotten her very presence, while she sat watching his face, with all her heart in her great hazel eyes.

At length, he turned to her slowly.

"Miss Ellerslie," he said, "I wonder if you will let me tell you a—a fairy story?"

"A fairy story!" She doubted the evidence of her own ears.

"Yes. I suppose you think I have suddenly taken leave of my senses; but, if you will listen, I promise you will not be bored."

"I will listen, gladly," she replied, softly. The significance that lay behind his quiet utterance gave her a sudden glimmer of comprehension.

"I haven't heard a fairy story, myself, for many years, and I don't remember that I ever told one before; so you must bear with me, if, sometimes, I get partly out of the picture. . . . My story is about two beautiful Princesses, sisters. One was tiny and fair, with golden hair, like most of the Princesses in fairy tales. The other was tall and stately, with auburn tresses—at least I think so; for of course I have never seen them."

He paused, and from the girl beside him came a soft murmur.

"The fair Princess was wedded to an Ogre, and, together with her sister, lived in his castle, in a

strange, far country. The Ogre was cruel, which was very terrible; and weak, which was worse; and there was a foolish Princess, who lived in her castle, nearby. She was not wicked, this Princess, but only foolish, as I have said.

“The Ogre thought he loved her better than the fair Princess, and wanted to drive the golden-haired one and her sister away, that the foolish Princess might reign in her stead.

“But there was a law in the kingdom in which they dwelt, which even the Ogre was forced to obey, and that law read that, in order to accomplish his purpose, the Ogre was forced to wrest from the fair Princess a certain treasure which she possessed, and valued above all else in the world, and he must trample it under his feet, on the public highway. This treasure was a casket of ivory and gold, and within it lay a jewel beyond price, and that jewel the fair Princess called her Good Name, and she guarded it tirelessly that none might take it from her.

“One night, the elder sister, the Princess with the auburn tresses, had gone afar, to the wedding festivities of another Princess, and the golden-haired one strayed down to a dungeon set apart in the Castle, where she overheard the Ogre telling the foolish Princess how he meant to obtain,

by foul means, the casket of ivory and gold. The fair Princess supposed they were conspiring together to rob her of her treasure, and she fled back to her chamber. Had she waited, she would have heard the foolish Princess repudiate him, and vow never to look upon his face again. That is the sad part of the story—that she didn't wait.

“Now, it is a curious, but very important, fact that in those days—we will call them the Middle Ages; that might mean any time, for when human beings call their year A.D. 3824, we shall belong to the Middle Ages—well, in those days they had clocks, just as we do. It doesn't seem likely, but it's true.

“The fair Princess sat in her turret chamber, until she saw the foolish Princess and her father ride away from the castle. Then she went down immediately to the dungeon, and told the Ogre what she had overheard. Now, when she entered the dungeon, it was just half-past eleven, by the great, jeweled clock in the hall of the castle. It must have been; for that was the hour on which the foolish Princess and her father departed, and the golden-haired one had descended at once.

“The Ogre grew great with wrath, and defied her, and, weeping she retired to her turret chamber. She did not know that she had left a strand of her

golden hair, clinging to a swinging chandelier in the dungeon.

"When her sister returned from the wedding festivities, at one o'clock, the golden-haired one told her of the plot to rob her of her casket of ivory and gold. And the auburn-haired Princess knew there was but one way to save it, and to avenge the creation of the plot against it; so she descended to the dungeon, and slew the Ogre."

Damon Gaunt paused, and the woman beside him gave a little, shuddering moan, and her hands clenched and unclenched on the arm of her chair. After a moment, he continued, as if he had not heard.

"Hours after the Ogre had been slain, someone entered the dungeon, and tried to change its aspect so that it would appear that a robber band had broken into the castle, and slain the Ogre for his personal treasure. This personage took the treasure away with him, to make the robbers' attempt seem more real; although he did not want it, and knew not what to do with it.

"Now, when it became known throughout the kingdom that the Ogre was dead, there was great excitement; for, although he had not been liked, or even respected, he had possessed two idols, which in those days were considered very pre-

cious. They were called Family and Riches, and because of these he was considered a very great Ogre, indeed. So the people sent Gnome, who was thought to be very wise, to find out for them who had slain the Ogre. The Gnome dwelt in a mountain, and delved far into the earth like a mole; for, like a mole, he was blind.

"He came to the castle, and felt about the dungeon, and found the strand of golden hair, clinging to the chandelier, and he knew that whosoever it belonged to had been in the dungeon that night. He knew, also, that it was golden by its texture, and he touched the hair of the foolish Princess, and of the auburn-haired Princess; but when he came to the fair-haired one, he knew it was she.

"She told him that she had been in the dungeon on the previous morning, not during the fateful night; but she realized, as she said it, that he knew it was an untruth, and, as he departed from her presence, he heard her cry out to her sister: 'Oh, auburn-haired one! He knows! He knows!'

"Later, when he had discovered many things, the Gnome returned to the turret chamber of the fair Princess, and she, fearing that he knew the truth, cried out that she had slain the Ogre, between the hours of twelve and one o'clock. She told

him, also, that it was her sister who had gone down later, and tried to change the aspect of the dungeon. When the Gnome expressed a doubt of this, she vowed that the auburn-haired one had admitted it to her.

"Of course, it might have looked very, very bad for the fair Princess, if the Gnome hadn't learned three things: The first was that the fair Princess could not have slain the Ogre between the hours of twelve and one, because during that time the Ogre was alive, and something else had occurred in the dungeon then. What that something was, the Gnome never afterward revealed to his dying day.

"The second thing the Gnome had learned was who the personage was that had tried to alter the appearance of the dungeon, and this he never revealed either; but he knew that it could not have been the Princess of the Auburn Hair. The third was that he knew where the personal treasures of the Ogre were, and that the Auburn-haired one could not have taken them.

"There was one fact which no one knew, however, and that was that, when the Princess of the Auburn Hair went down to slay the Ogre, she dropped from her garment three telltale bits of evidence. At the wedding festivities she had that evening attended,

much rice had been cast at the bride, and some of it had lodged in the robe of the Auburn-haired One. When she slew the Ogre, three grains of rice fell from her mantle."

The woman beside him caught her breath sharply, and Gaunt rose and went to his desk. He picked up an envelope from it, and, returning, opened it carefully. Then, he took her unresisting hand in his, turned it over, and shook out upon her palm three grains of rice—the three tiny, hard globules, like irregular pearls, which he had picked up from the floor of the den, where they had lain at the feet of the murdered man. Gaunt did not seat himself again, but, standing before her, he concluded:

"There isn't much more to the story. Of course, if the Gnome had seen the three grains of rice, it might have had a different ending; but he didn't, you see, because he was blind. So, he went back to his mountain, and no one ever knew who had slain the Ogre."

"He didn't—see them!" Barbara Ellerslie cried, with amazement and suddenly awakened hope lifting the music of her voice into a pæan of half-incredulous joy.

"No. You must remember, he was blind. And so—he failed."

"He—failed!" she repeated, gaspingly. "He—failed!"

Then, quite suddenly, she burst into a storm of weeping, burying her face in her arms, while the tears streamed down her face, and great, tearing sobs racked her body. Knowing this sudden storm to be but the reaction from a week of unspeakable horror and nerve-racking suspense, ending in blackest despair, he wisely let her have her cry out. It was only when her sobs had subsided to quivering sighs that he spoke, half-tenderly half-jocularly:

"By Jove! [I believe that's the only fairy story on record in which a Fairy Prince isn't mentioned! And that only because I forgot to mention him. He's sailing away next week, and he expects to take both the Princesses with him. But I believe one is to go as his wife. . . . Don't you think you'd better call him up? Of course, I've no way of knowing; but I rather think he's expecting a message from you tonight."

"Oh, I'll go straight home, and send for him to come to me! I don't care how late it is, or what the servants will think! Oh, Mr. Gaunt!" Her rich voice thrilled and deepened as she spoke. "What can I say to you? How can I ever thank you?"

"By being happy, by forgetting all that makes you sad, and by looking only to the future."

"I will—oh, I will!" she whispered, her head bowed as though he had uttered a benediction.

After a pause, she raised her head, and, looking straight into his face, she said slowly and carefully, as if choosing her words:

"Just one word more, Mr. Gaunt. In Kentucky, where we came from, the women are honored and protected, even when they're not—loved. And, when a woman is cruelly, vilely treated by a man; when, although innocent, she is about to be dragged through scandal, and—and worse, just to get her out of the way—why, then, sir, we kill. Not murder—kill! We don't knife in the dark, or strangle, or poison, or strike down with a blow, but we shoot, and shoot straight! If my father, or my brothers, or any man kin to us, had been alive, Garret Appleton would have lain in his grave long ago. But there wasn't anyone left, but just us two, little Natalie, and—me. You understand? . . . May God bless you, Mr. Gaunt!"

There was a sudden rustle, a delicate ungloved hand sought his, and raised it gently, swiftly, and he felt upon it the touch of two soft, fragrant lips, and then the sting of hot, scalding tears. . . .

His hand fell, there was a swirl of silken skirts, and the soft thud of a closing door.

Damon Gaunt stood for a moment where she had left him, his upraised face transfigured. Then, he bowed his head, and pressed his sightless eyes upon his hand, where it was wet with her tears.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTERMATH

IT was two years later. Again, Damon Gaunt stood at his window in the early autumn, drinking in the scents and sounds of the busy street life below, and, again, his hands strayed to the ivy vine upon the sill. He was thinking, too, of that day, two years before, which had ushered in the great event of his life, and his thoughts strayed to the far-off country, where the woman he loved had found happiness.

At a knock upon the door, he turned.

It was Miss Barnes, who entered with a large, square white envelope in her hand.

"Letter for you, Mr. Gaunt," she said.

"Yes? Will you read it to me, please?"

She opened the envelope, and glanced at its contents, and gave a short laugh.

"It won't be necessary, Mr. Gaunt. You can read this for yourself. It's been written on one of those new typewriters with the raised dots and points system, and it's post-marked Odessa."

"Ah, give it to me," Gaunt cried, eagerly. He took from her the large sheets of paper, covered with a peculiar arrangement of raised characters, and, spreading it out on the table before him, ran his fingers lightly over it.

"My dear Mr. Gaunt: My husband and I have often desired to write you; but we wished to have none but you know the contents of our letter. At last we have found this simple machine, and, by real good luck, at about the same time we saw in a newspaper, sent to us from America, by Harmon Witherspoon, an account of several articles on crime, which you had written for a current magazine. The account stated that you had written them, yourself, on this same make of typewriter which we have found out here. Randolph purchased one, at once, and I have been learning this system, that we may keep in touch with the best friend we have on earth.

"My sister is still with us. Her little son, born a year and a half ago, lived only a few hours; but she has become reconciled even to that loss. She is well and quietly happy. You may be interested in knowing that Harmon Witherspoon starts for Russia in two months. He began writing to Natalie six months after we left America. At first, she took no interest, and I was forced to reply

to his letters; but later she took up her own correspondence, and when he offered to come out, she did not forbid it. We think that possibly there may be something left in life for her, after all.

“There is something which my husband thinks should be told you—I think you know it already. An hour before we sailed from America, a package came to me with a typewritten, unsigned communication, telling me that, if I valued my future happiness and that of all the family, I would drop the package quietly overboard in mid-ocean. It was rather large and heavy; indeed, most of the space seemed to be taken up by a weight or stone. Through the sacking which covered it, I could feel several small, hard articles and something besides—something that felt like a leather bill-case. I obeyed the instructions on the typewritten card accompanying it; so the incident is closed. I ask no questions; I merely state this as a curious adventure.

“Will you let us hear from you? We will wait anxiously for your letter.

“I have left my greatest news until the last. There is another member of the family now—a very small member, and his name is Damon Gaunt Force. Some day, when he can understand, he must

be told a little of what his father and mother owe to the greatest-hearted man living.

"With gratitude and sincere affection,

"BARBARA ELLERSLIE-FORCE."

Gaunt crushed the letter between his hands, and bowed his head upon it, for a moment. It seemed that he could hear her voice, with its sweet, faintly husky drawl. He could feel again, the touch of her lips upon his hand. . . .

"Dear God!"

Steps sounded along the hall. There was a sharp rap upon the door, and Jenkins, his voice beaming, announced:

"Inspector Hanrahan, Mr. Gaunt."

Gaunt raised his head slowly, and passed his hand across his brow, as if dazed. Then he said:

"My old friend, Hanrahan—what on earth can he want? Well, show him up, Jenkins."

The faithful man-servant departed, chuckling. Ever since Gaunt had given up his life-work, Jenkins had been sorely worried and depressed. Could this visit of the Inspector mean a return to the activities that had made his master famous on two continents?

"How do you do, Mr. Gaunt, sir?"

"How do you do, Inspector? What brings you here, this beautiful morning?"

"Something that will make you slip into your coat, and come out on Long Island with me, as fast as the car can get us there. The greatest case in years, Mr. Gaunt—positively the greatest! Daughter of Carrol Whitney, one of those Meadowbrook Colony millionaires you know, disappears during a dance at her father's house, last night, and is found an hour ago, under the cedars in a secluded portion of the estate, with her throat cut. Seventeen, beautiful, no love-affair, no motive, no clue. I promised to get you, if I had to kidnap you."

Gaunt smiled, and shook his head.

"I am sorry, Inspector," he said. "But I am out of the game, for good and all. I have not taken a case in two years, you know. I shall never take another."

"Aw! Why do you keep harping on that? Just because you failed in that Appleton case! We can't win out every time. I've lost more cases, myself, than I'd admit to anyone on earth but you; and, remember, no one else has ever solved the mystery of how Garret Appleton came to his death. You remember what I said to you, here in this very room, just a few days before you threw up the case? I said that it would be a good frame-up to hand in at headquarters, if I failed to find

the one who did it, to let it go as a suicide, which someone of the family had discovered, and changed the room to make it look as if robbery had been the motive, so as to save the family name. Well, upon my soul, I believe that is the true solution. Funny thing those valuables were never found, isn't it?

"Yes, it does seem strange," Gaunt admitted.

"Well, anyway, you should not have taken it so much to heart. There ain't a man can touch you in the business, today, Mr. Gaunt. Come on down with me to Long Island—do!"

"Sorry, Inspector—this is final. I'll never take another case."

"Well, I don't see why you feel so bad about it. I know you're cleverer than the rest of us, and I suppose you think that, if you hadn't been blind, you could have solved it—you would have seen something that we missed. You're too touchy about it, that's all. Look at the wonderful work you have done in the past! If it's just because you can't see that you won't take another case—"

Gaunt turned upon him with a swift gesture for silence, and there was a harsh note of agony in his voice, as he cried:

"Oh, no, Inspector; I see—too much!"

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